

The Day Roosevelt was Assassinated

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Can anyone alter fate? All of us combined...or one great figure...or someone strategically placed, who happens to be in the right spot. Chance. Accident. And our lives, our world, hanging on it.
Philip K. Dick

It is 15 February 1933. President-elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt is visiting Miami. From the back of an open car he is giving an impromptu speech in the Bayfront Park area when shots ring out. Roosevelt is hit in the chest and falls at the feet of Chicago mayor Anton Cermak, whose hand he had been shaking. Cermak sobs “I wish it had been me instead of you Mr President.” On 6 March Roosevelt dies of peritonitis, and John Nance Garner is sworn in as 32nd President of the United States. The assassin, a disaffected Italian immigrant called Giuseppe (“Joe”) Zangara, freely admits murder and is executed on 30 March.

This did not happen. But it easily might have. Zangara’s bullet in fact missed Roosevelt by inches and killed Cermak. We know that Roosevelt went on to re-energize the country’s flagging economy through the New Deal, aid the British Empire in its lone fight against Nazi Germany, and after Pearl Harbor and Hitler’s declaration of war on the United States, lead the country into and largely through the Second World War. That much is history. But suppose Zangara had hit and killed the President-elect. What would, what *could* have happened then? How might history then have unfolded?

This counterfactual twist to history is the background to Philip K. Dick’s masterful novel *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which deservedly won a Hugo Prize the next year. Unlike the majority of Dick’s work, it is not science fiction, but belongs to the genre of *alternate history*. This is an intermittent theme in Dick’s work. In *Minority Report* the story turns on there being several possible futures that can be precognized, brought about or prevented, and how we may freely try to realize one rather than others. But none of Dick’s work so immerses the reader in a single alternate history as *High Castle*. Not many writers have tried the alternate history genre, and fewer still have pulled it off. Dick was influenced by the example of Ward Moore’s 1953 novel *Bring the Jubilee*, an alternate history which starts with the Confederate States of America winning the Battle of Gettysburg and the American Civil War, the hinge event being the successful Confederate capture of Little Round Top in the battle. A more recent example is Robert Harris’s gripping *Fatherland*, set in a Germany that has won World War II. But to my mind Dick’s book is the pick of the pack. It

succeeds in part because it is chillingly believable. The characters in the story are the usual mix of partly good, partly bad people, acting for the usual sorts of mixed motives. Their freedom of action is limited. It is the alternate history in which they are embedded that gives the book its edge.

Of course Dick does not tell the story in a linear way. He plunges us first into the alternate reality, so we get used to it. We learn about Zangara in passing, and the event is not treated by the book's characters as hugely important, because all the big important things happened to others, after the world had been shunted into the alternate path by the assassination. The story is set mainly in San Francisco, around 1960. For lack of strong US leadership, Germany and Japan have won the war. Even the US has been conquered and partitioned: the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard are ruled by puppet regimes answering to Germany and Japan respectively, with a weak buffer state in between. Hitler is alive but paralysed and senile from syphilis, the German Chancellor Bormann is dying. The two superpowers divide the world but there is cold war rivalry between them, and some elements aiming for power in Germany want to destroy Japan in a nuclear attack and take over the whole world.

The characters in the story are all linked to this scenario, but the more convincing players are seemingly historically minor ones: a Jewish jewelry maker, his estranged wife, a dealer in fake Americana, a middle-ranking Japanese official. It is through them that we inhabit the other world. Dick goes out of his way to make this world seem normal and believable. His characters accept things as they are. By introducing grammatical mistakes into the internal thoughts of his Japan-influenced characters he makes them alien to our familiar English-dominated culture.

The other link between all the characters is a book, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, written by a man said to live behind strong security high in the Rockies, the high castle of the title. By a neat reversal, this book describes an alternate history in which the Allies *win* the war. This angers the Reich authorities enough for them to ban it in the rump USA and to try to have the author assassinated. The doubly alternate history is similar to but intriguingly different from the actual course of events: the war goes on for longer, and Britain remains a superpower.

Enough: if you haven't read the book yet, I heartily recommend it.

Dick's book is "realistic", and realism is perhaps the major concern in his writings. He once wrote, "My major preoccupation is the question, 'What is reality?'". In *Time Out of Joint* (1959), the cosy 1950s world in which the hero lives is a sham. In reality it is near 2000, a nuclear war is raging, and the hero is uniquely able to predict where the next strike will fall. He does so best when at ease, so the sham world is there just to keep him relaxed and efficient, his guesses being part of a supposed newspaper quiz. In this case, it is clear that we have a real world and a merely apparent, constructed "world", through the cracks of which the hero begins to see. A similar mismatch

between *appearance* and reality is present in the brilliant short story “Adjustment Team” (1954).

The reality of Dick’s alternative world in *The Man in the High Castle* is not meant to be a sham or mere appearance: it is as real as our world. There is no way for its inhabitants to escape into a realer reality, any more than we can. At one point one of Dick’s characters gets what appears to be a tantalizing glimpse, or excursion, into “our” reality, one containing the ugly Embarcadero highway, which really and controversially existed for a while in San Francisco, but was never built in the alternate world. But the episode is brief and its status is not clear.

In ‘How to a Universe that Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later’ Dick wrote “Reality is that which, when you stop thinking about it, doesn’t go away.” This is as good a characterization as anything a professional philosopher could come up with. The first *philosophical* question that Dick’s book raises is then whether a world described by an alternate history is less real than ours, or just as real. Is our world, the actual world, the only real one? Or are there other worlds, which are just as real as ours? Dick’s story is not the first to raise this issue, but by its brilliance and conviction it raises it in a particularly direct and striking way.

In late twentieth century philosophy, much discussion has turned on the question of alternative possible worlds. The idea of possible worlds goes back to the German philosopher Leibniz (1646–1716) but they were put center stage of contemporary metaphysics and logic by the American philosopher David K. Lewis (1941–2001). Lewis claims that there really are innumerable such possible worlds, that every consistent way things might have been really exists, in just the same way as our world exists. That we call such alternative worlds “merely possible” and our world “actual” is due only to our being anchored in our own world. We say our world is actual, but any intelligent inhabitants of other worlds say their world is actual. Our world is no more real than theirs; to think our world is the only real one is like a person who has never left New York thinking that only New York really exists, and London, Paris, Rome and Tokyo are only figments of New Yorkers’ imaginations. That is a sort of chauvinism: world chauvinism. Most philosophers find Lewis’s views incredible, but it is hard to show them inconsistent.

We think that real history is different from alternate history because real historians are trying to get at the *facts*, at what *really* happened. Dick’s novel holds up a mirror to this assumption: he describes a world in which the alternate history is taken for granted: people are as ignorant of what happened or happens *there* as we are about our world, but in his world there are people thinking about worlds alternate to *that* one, and those worlds can be more like ours than his. We think Dick’s world is unreal; his characters think worlds like ours are unreal. Are we right and they wrong, or is it symmetrical? If it is, then our world has no exclusive title to the label ‘real’.

Dick himself toyed quite seriously with the idea that there is no single reality. He says for

example, “I think that, like in my writing, reality is always a soap bubble, Silly Putty thing anyway. In the universe people are in, people put their hands through the walls, and it turns out they’re living in another century entirely. ... I often have the feeling — and it does show up in my books — that this is all just a stage.” (Interview, *Science Fiction Review*, August 1976).

Lewis’s many real worlds capture this view, except that there are no channels between them: each world is isolated and self-sufficient, just more or less similar to others. This gives them a feature which makes them unlike our world. It is their *determinism*. Determinism is the view that what happens in the world is completely fixed, or determined, by how it is at any given time. The complete state of the world at a certain time, say midnight GMT 1 January 2000, fixes in complete detail how it will be at any other time, past or future. On this view, most famously associated with the great French mathematician and cosmologist Pierre-Simon Laplace, history runs on rails with no branching or deviation. Each of Lewis’s worlds, because it is complete in all details at all times and places, is deterministic.

There are several reasons for thinking our world is not deterministic. One is that we seem to have within ourselves the power to choose and determine how things turn out, usually in fairly small and local matters: what to eat today, whether to give money to a charity, and the like, but sometimes in bigger things too. We call this *freedom*. Some philosophers have denied freedom, but most people and even most philosophers believe we are free, within limits. This is what makes praise and reward for good actions and blame and punishment for bad ones meaningful. Being free means being able by your actions to determine that the world develops in one way rather than another, where before your decision, it could have gone either way.

A second reason for thinking determinism is false comes from modern science. According to standard views of quantum physics, many events happen spontaneously, without a cause. A radioactive nucleus splits: it might have split earlier or later, and nothing determines that it must split when it actually does: it just happens that way. Modern physics deals with this by using probabilities. While not all physicists accept this standard view, most do.

The third reason for thinking determinism is wrong is the one most closely related to Dick’s novel. It is that many events happen by chance, or coincidence. Zangara might have killed Roosevelt: it was just chance that he did not. No guiding principle or guardian angel kept the President-elect safe: he was lucky. Luck is institutionalized in lotteries and other games of chance, indeed it was in thinking about such games that the science of probability was born. Within the novel, Dick raises the question himself, and that is this essay’s motto.

You might think that chance, luck and accident concern not how the world is in itself, but simply reflect our ignorance. We do not know how the lottery balls will fall out, but if we knew all

their positions, speeds and trajectories, and had a sufficiently powerful computer, we could predict the lottery result with certainty. This was Laplace's idea. If Laplace and Lewis are right, we are simply ignorant about how the world will in fact develop. Our ignorance is about which deterministic world we are in, not about how our one world might follow different histories.

But there is objective chance in this world, and this is highlighted by alternate histories like Dick's. Consider coincidence. Sometimes you meet someone you know, completely by surprise, in a place you would not both expect to be. It seems to be purely by chance. Nobody planned or arranged the meeting: you just both happened to be there at the same time. (That is what 'coincidence' originally meant: being in the same place.) To take the element of personal freedom out of it, imagine two grains of wheat that happen to end up touching in a huge granary. Grains of wheat have no free will: they go where the forces of nature and the efforts of humanity put them. That these two grains end up in contact, when they may have come from different ends of the country, is coincidence.

Technically we can say coincidence occurs when two causal chains of events merge which previously had no interaction. Lottery machines are deliberately designed so that what people have put on their lottery slips has no influence on how the balls fall out: any win is a coincidence. My event of choosing these numbers and the machine's event of selecting these balls belong to different causal chains until I learn of my win and claim my prize.

Normally coincidence and chance do not make a huge difference to the way things turn out, but occasionally they do. The outcome of a battle may depend on whether a message gets through or whether a general is feeling unwell. Sometimes an inspirational leader is hit by a single bullet. King Charles XII of Sweden and General Stonewall Jackson both died in battle this way. Sometimes an omission rather than an action is crucial. Whether Winston Churchill or Lord Halifax would replace Neville Chamberlain as British Prime Minister in 1940 seems to have turned on Churchill saying nothing to King George VI at a crucial point in their discussion. Halifax would probably have negotiated an armistice with Hitler, and the history of the world would have been very different. Dick's twist to history lets a bullet from Zangara's gun deviate just a few inches from its actual trajectory, as could so easily have happened, had Zangara aimed fractionally differently. The significance of the crucial event lies in the magnitude of its consequences: the histories diverge considerably.

Now I think Dick is right that hinge events can make huge differences to how things turn out. But I do not buy Dick's hint—or Lewis's theory—that all the different possible worlds are equally real. Only our world is real.

That still does not fix what our one real world is like. Here are four possible positions about

that. The world might consist of all and only events that actually happen at some time, and the objects involved in these events. These objects exist and events happen at different times, but the world encompasses all of them and simply *is*. This view is called *eternalism*. According to the second conception, the world changes with time, as ever new events happen and objects come into and go out of existence. Events are unreal before they happen. Since reality literally grows by the addition of ever more events and things, philosophers call this the *growing block* theory of the world in time. Taking the same view about the past as growing block takes about the future shrinks the world to only present events and objects. It is called *presentism*. The final theory says that all possible future events are real, and that as time goes by, events make some of these realities go away, leaving others. This is known as the *tree-pruning* model. The world is not linear in time but like a branching tree, at each instant many futures branch off. As things happen and time goes by, branches incompatible with what occurs are pruned, and reality shrinks. So in 1930 for example both our world and Dick's world are real, since it has yet to be determined that Zangara fails to assassinate Roosevelt; by 1934 however Dick's world had been pruned away, whereas ours still remained among the future branching possibilities.

It is often supposed that the first position, that all and only actual events and objects are real, does not allow for chance, coincidence or freedom of choice. If only what actually happens is real, how can some action or event make a difference to what is real? Surely whatever happens was bound to do so. That is fatalism: history on rails. So those who believe in chance and freedom tend to be drawn to one of the other theories. I think that is wrong: chance and freedom can live alongside eternalism.

Coincidence plays a role in our individual lives, and therefore in history too. As people progress through life, day upon day, they coincidentally encounter other people, things, end up in places and situations without planning or forethought. I might walk out of my house one morning to find a person collapsed on my doorstep. Maybe they had nothing to do with me and were not seeking out my doorstep rather than anywhere else. How I react to this situation, what I make of it, what chain of events I set in motion upon encountering them is part of my life, and now part of theirs. From a chance encounter the two lives may become more or less intricately and deeply intertwined. Such can be the beginnings of a good story. Had the person not collapsed by chance on *my* doorstep, none of this would have happened. The coincidence is it being *this* person with *this* history that lands on just *this* doorstep. What ensues from that, no matter how tightly constrained by our two different natures, would not have arisen without this coincidental encounter. So while our lives are not wholly ruled by chance, chance plays a fair part in them. The more so then in history, which is the tapestry created by the interweaving of people, events, places and things, many of them

coincidental. So if chance plays any part in people's lives, which I believe it does, since human history is composed of the lives of all humans, chance plays a part in history. The more powerful and influential a person is or gets to be, the wider the effects of chance events in his or her life. Although Leo Tolstoy thought otherwise, the actions of leaders and other powerful people typically have a bigger effect on history than those of ordinary people, and these effects are magnified by modern technology. When President Truman decided the US would drop atomic bombs on Japan, the result was to kill between 160,000 and 240,000 people and injure or shorten the lives of tens of thousands more, at the same time saving the lives of many hundreds of thousands of others.

As in the different possible outcomes to Zangara's shooting, chance and coincidence play a part in determining history, and the more crucial and powerful the people involved, the bigger the differences they make. Yet eternalism can still be the right view about events in time. Nothing in the idea of an event being the outcome of merging two previously unconnected causal chains requires future events to be unreal. While things might develop in one way rather than another, that does not mean we should regard the eliminated possibilities as having the same claim to reality as what actually happens. Eternalism has many other advantages as an account of time. So eternalism can live alongside indeterminism. That means that the world Philip K. Dick describes in *The Man in the High Castle* has no reality whatever, but still things could have happened as he describes. Dick probably would not have agreed. If not, then as a philosopher I pay enough respect to him to say that I think he, as a philosopher, was wrong.