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Citation for published version:
Raffel, S 2017 'Notes on Trump 2017'.

Link:
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Notes On Trump

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Clearly, the best tool at our disposal for forecasting the future is probability theory. However, there is one category for which it seems unnecessary, even silly, to insist on estimating probability, that which is logically impossible. In this book, *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein goes so far as to mock those who would require us to use probabilistic language when discussing things that, in reality, seem impossible. Thus

But imagine people who were never quite certain of these things, but said they were *very* probably so, and that it did not pay to doubt them. Such a person, then, would say in my situation: It is extremely unlikely that I have ever been on the moon”. Etc. etc. *How* would the life of these people differ from ours? For there *are* people who say it is merely extremely probable that water over a fire will boil and not freeze, and that therefore strictly speaking what we consider impossible is only improbable. What different does this make in their lives? (number 338, p. 43, his emphasis)

Wittgenstein’s point is that such people are being so excessively cautious as to be utterly unreasonable. There is a point, namely when things seem logically impossible, when a reasonable person would say, not that X not happening is extremely unlikely, but instead that it is a certainty. We can put it that Wittgenstein is mocking those who can never be *sure*.

But, in another section of his book, Wittgenstein admits that determining what it would be unreasonable to doubt from what is actually an impossible occurrence is not so easy.

There are cases where doubt is unreasonable, but others where it seems logically impossible. And there seems to be no clear boundary between them. (number 454, p. 59)
But does this inability to distinguish the ‘merely’ unreasonable to doubt from events that are logically impossible matter in practice? It would only matter if there are things which even exceptionally reasonable people think it makes no sense to doubt which, yet, come to pass. A recent event, the election of Donald Trump, demonstrates that, indeed, there are such things.

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Until the results began to come in on election night, it is a fact that most reasonable people were not just believing but even were feeling sure that Trump would lose the election. Admittedly, such a complete failure to anticipate a Trump presidency cannot be attributed to the foremost advocate of the use of probability theory in predicting election results, Nate Silver. By the night before the election, Silver was, in effect, saying that it did make sense not to be at all sure Trump would lose as he gave him around a 30% chance of becoming president.

However, presumably, if we want to argue that we can manage to anticipate an event, we should be able to predict it earlier than just the night before it happened. So, before giving him too much credit, we will need to explore Silver’s earlier track record in this regard. Arguably, he too went through a stage when, though he realized that a Trump presidency was a logical possibility, he was still sure he would never be President.

Most relevant here is not even the initial period of the 2016 primaries when Silver was giving Trump only a 5% chance of being the nominee. About this time, we can say, in defence of probability theory, not just that, after all, 5% is not nothing but also, as he actually has claimed, that due to unusual features of the Trump candidacy, Silver made major errors that caused him to misapply his own theory.

But what is more significant is an anecdote reported in the book Silver published in 2012. Here Silver is trying to demonstrate how unreliable, compare to him, the well-known television election pundits are. Citing the case of one pundit, Dick Morris, Silver reports that in 2011
He said that Donald Trump would run for the Republican nomination and had a “damn good” chance of winning it. (55)

That even Silver, at this time (2012) believed it made no sense to doubt that Trump could ever be president is indicated by the fact that he used this anecdote, not to show how prescient Morris was, but to show that this was a prediction that turned out not just to be wrong but ‘horribly wrong’ because ‘Trump officially declined to run for president just two weeks after Morris insisted he would do so.’ (55)

Of course, there is a big reason why Silver is not using this anecdote in a way that leads to the opposite conclusion that Morris was remarkably prescient in that Trump actually was president just 5 years after Morris’ prediction, namely because at time of writing, 2011, Silver, like most of the rest of us, felt it made no sense to think that a Trump presidency would ever happen.

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I want to explore this phenomenon of not being able to anticipate an event which, as it turns out happens, further with the aid of some material in a paper by Peter McHugh. McHugh depicts our world as one in which

The everyday trafficking of realization alone...and the not-embodiment of possibility co-exist and which constitute one corpus: a continuous relation between the possible and the real, where the possible is as real as the real. (5)

He means that certain things, indeed many things, are real in the sense of really possible but not yet realized in that they have not happened (yet). The inability to anticipate enters because our situation here is one where we should

“know” that what does not exist may or may not come to pass in existence (5)

and on in which we should

know that some of these passages are not, will not, cannot be known in advance, even though they can be recognized for what they are if and when they appear in conduct. (5)
In McHugh’s terms, Trump is of interest as a case of something that (we now know) was a real possibility before it happened but also one that, as far as I know only with the exception of Morris, not just was not but even could not be known in advance.

The question now of concern is the process by which such a phenomenon of coming to recognize such an event unfolds. To be clear, we are talking about events that, though they obviously were possible, because they happened, are such that we did not think were possible. To put it more strongly, and in Wittgenstein’s terms, so impossible was it to anticipate them that, though they were not exactly logically impossible, still it made no sense to doubt a belief that they would never happen.

I turn back to Wittgenstein for material on what the experience of such events being realized is like. When something happens which one was sure was impossible, clearly it is right to say one got it wrong. Yet Wittgenstein is convinced that is it misleading merely to conclude one made a mistake. His reasoning here depends on his analysis of the nature of mistakes.

When someone makes a mistake, this can be fitted into what he knows aright. (number 74, p. 11)

What is not best seen as a mistake is when there is no such fit, when it is not only one of one’s propositions that turns out to be wrong.

What I hold fast to is not one proposition but a nest of propositions. (number 225, p. 30, his emphasis)

When what one thinks impossible happens, what is being upset is the nest of what one holds fast. In such a case, more than wrong my ‘rock bottom’ (number 248, p. 33) conviction will be challenged and so it makes sense that I will be ‘shaken’. (number 421, p. 54) Another way to put it is that I will be thrown ‘entirely off the rails.’ (number 517, p. 67) Or, again, that what occurs shakes one because, from the perspective of what one thought one knew, it is a ‘complete irregularity.’ (number 647, p. 85)
That persons were shaken—thrown off the rails—when Trump won is no exaggeration and Wittgenstein’s analysis helps us to see why that experience means that this was more than a case merely of being mistaken as to which of two candidates won. Instead, a whole nest of propositions, some rock bottom certainties—were proved wrong.

In this case, what lost credibility was not just that someone with dubious qualifications could become president—that eventuality was, alas, not really unprecedented. Instead it was the case that someone who was obviously—transparently—even laughably unqualified, against all the odds, managed to get himself elected. For all those who have been shaken by this event, the question becomes what might be the most appropriate response. In a passage already quoted from McHugh’s paper, he suggests the need to recognize such events for what they are, if and when they occur.

He then goes on to explore how this process of recognition might occur. What I find most striking about this further analysis is my impression that, in the course of it, he gets shaken. Whereas he begins his analysis with the assumption that what recognizing an event for what it is would consist in is attempting to make sense of it, it suddenly hits him that there is something seriously wrong with such an approach. He remarks that the very attempt to make sense biases one’s efforts because what can happen ‘is independent of the affirmative notions of sense and the negative notions of nonsense’ that we are used to ‘as our standard for collective exchange.’ (6)

Because what can happen—real possibilities—could well be nonsensical, there is a danger in trying to make sense of these because that assumes that happenings are ‘synonymous with sense.’ (6) The danger is in conducting our recognizing work in a way that makes us ‘virtually in thrall to sense’ as if ‘what does not make sense cannot circulate.’ (6)

Though we now know that besides it being possible, the election of Trump actually did happen, how can we avoid being in thrall to sense as we attempt to recognize it for what it is? At least two conditions that would need to be satisfied spring to mind. Either we would need to conclude that there are hidden depths to the man. That is, that he actually has more of the qualities that presidents must have than we
appreciated. There have been moments since his election when this conclusion seemed possible, e. g. when he managed a state of the union address that some commentators conceded was ‘presidential’ or those aspects of his first foreign trip that were said to be gaffe free. However, such moments were outweighed, indeed cancelled out, by numerous unfortunate incidents, just for example the fact that he gave classified information to, of all people, the Russians or the fact that he actually shoved the prime minister of Montenegro in order to get front and centre at a photo shoot. Or one could argue that while he really does not have even the minimum qualities we think of as presidential, he has other characteristics that make it sensible to have him as president anyway. In this vein, some of his supporters argued that he could be the breath of fresh air that could shake up Washington—‘drain the swamp.’ However, that he has accomplished so little since his inauguration gives paid to this idea.

So it does seem a senseless event but it is worth considering why, as has happened to some extent in this case, there is such a tendency to assume that what happens must make sense. I would suggest it is because there are things that really are associated with what happens that are easily confused with the phenomenon of sense, namely causes. Causes can be found even for events that are virtually universally assumed to not make any sense, a prime example being a killing spree by someone running amok.

To argue that Trump’s election is senseless is not at all to deny that there have been causal factors that produced this outcome. The aforementioned Nate Silver has provided convincing statistical evidence that, if the FBI had not announced 11 days before the election the reopening of an investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails, Trump would have been denied victory. Also, it has been pointed out, notably by Paul Krugman, that Trump told some very effective lies, for example his claim to be able to bring coal mining jobs to West Virginian, a state in which he won a landslide victory.

That there are causes of this event has an important consequence for those understandably concerned that an event however senseless could also have damaging short term, long term, and even permanent consequences. If the causes of X are reversible, there is no reason to expect X to endure. Relevant here is the fact that, according to Nate Silver, when just before the election, FBI director Comey announced that Clinton would not be charged after all, poll numbers started
moving back in her direction. While there was not enough time for this recovery to be complete before the election, it is likely that it has continued after the election in a way that is contributing to destabilizing Trump’s position. With regard to the coal miners claim, if, as is likely, the claim is indeed proved to be false, Trump should lose support even in his West Virginia stronghold.

This paper has been concerned with a phenomenon that was thought to be impossible and therefore was not and, to all intents and purposes, could not have been anticipated. It has also been concerned with issues connected with recognizing it did after all, prove possible because it happened.

But what about the continued failure to recognize it, even once we know it is possible because it has happened? It is a fact that, even now, though polls show the numbers who support him and, in particular, the numbers who strongly support him dwindling, he still has the support of nearly 40% of the population. Also, while they are not exactly steadfast in their support, by and large Republican lawmakers are not yet actively resisting him.

I would suggest that different explanations are required to understand the shared failure to recognize that we have an obviously unqualified president by both of these groups. Among voters, naiveté must figure but also so-called cognitive dissonance, i. e. a reluctance to accept a fact that is inconsistent with one’s previous behaviour and beliefs, in this case whatever beliefs lead one to vote for Trump in the first place.

However, neither naiveté nor cognitive dissonance will work for Republican lawmakers since, as indicated by their almost universal opposition to him in the primaries, they really never thought Trump should be president. For them, it is not an inability to recognize him for what he is. They are refusing to publically recognize-to acknowledge-what surely they must know. In other words, theirs is a case of complicity.

References
