

Existential Risk / Opportunity Singularity Management

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Making Quests Work

by James Blodgett

Existential risk/opportunity singularity management is a momentous quest. The problem is to make it something that we can really do.

I am inspired by Don Quixote. He has a quest, but it is not real. He sees the mundane world through crazy eyes that transform it into an imaginary land in which he is a gallant knight. He is crazy, but he is truly gallant because he knows that his quest is impossible, and he tries to do it anyway. We can learn something from him about quests, and then we have to get beyond that to make the quest real.

My first assignment to readers is to watch a bit of Don Quixote to see what I mean.

Don Quixote is featured in the musical "Man of La Mancha," which has become a worldwide favorite. It has been produced in the following languages: Bengali, Bulgarian, Chinese, Dutch, English, Finnish, German, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hungarian, Irish, Japanese, Korean, Serbian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swahili, Ukrainian, and Uzbek. The original production won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical. Several complete productions are available on YouTube. There is also a movie version.

Listen to the song "The Quest" from this musical, also widely known as "The Impossible Dream." A version is on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfHnzYEHAow> . In this song, Don Quixote speaks of his quest with many metaphors for impossibility: "to right the unrightable wrong," "to fight the unbeatable foe," and with a metaphor that is most relevant for us, "to reach the unreachable star." He doubles down on that one,

describing it as the essence of his quest: "This is my quest, to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far."

It seems impossible to manage something as humongous as a singularity. However, it can be done and it has been done, if you will accept my definition of a singularity. It is not always done successfully, but it is important to try. It is also important not to drop the ball, because it is a very big ball.

The term "singularity" comes from mathematics. It is the point where exponential growth goes to something like infinity. Our development of technology has been exponential. Since cave men times, technology has advanced beyond stone axes and fire, and we developed, in rough order: agriculture, writing, metals, machinery, printing, telegraphs, automobiles, airplanes, radar, TV, computers, and the Internet, most in a shorter time frame than the last. Exponential growth sometimes hits limits, but as long as this trend continues, we can extrapolate to an amazing future. I define any amazing development as a form of singularity.

People who are selling "the singularity" say that, when we reach it, it will be so amazing that we won't be able to predict what it will be. At this point they usually start predicting. The iconic picture of "the singularity" is that brain scans become so accurate that we can determine the state of each of our 100 trillion synapses and their interconnections, and computers will become so powerful that we will be able to simulate this on a computer. The idea is that, if this process was done on you, a version of your mind would wake up inside the computer. You would not be locked in there. You could walk around a virtual world like Second Life, and you could talk with normal people via telephone and video. You could even use a robot body to move around our real world. Some Christians believe in a "rapture" in which the faithful float up to heaven, and all others are left behind. This version of the singularity would be a "rapture for nerds." Living forever in a computer is sort of like going to heaven.

This singularity technology is somewhat plausible, but I guess that it really won't work. It may be impossible to read the state and the interconnections of 100 trillion synapses. Also, some speculate that each neuron computes within its cell body, using things like quantum computing in the microtubules or logic gates in the dendrites, making our brain more complex than we think. However, I also guess that our exponential growth of technology is not over yet, and that we will see more amazing developments. I also think that we have seen amazing developments in our recent past. I define them as singularities too. We can learn from people who helped to manage them.

One of our past singularities involved transcending hunting and gathering, settling and interconnecting the world, and developing the technology, the polity, and the economic tools to make this work. This would have seemed like a singularity to cave men. Traditional ways of managing work and the economy, with a few alpha males

running the show and others obeying, didn't work as well in this new world. Feudalism and slavery used many of the old methods. However, heroes of history, people like Plato, Benjamin Franklin, Adam Smith, Wilberforce, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mandela, and many others, helped us find better methods. Even people with bad ideas helped us when we tried them and found that they didn't work, although it would be nice to find a better way to do that. Testing bad ideas can involve lots of human suffering, and in the context of singularities, could be an existential risk.

Benjamin Franklin is an example and an exemplar of someone who helped to make this past singularity work. He started out as a printer. He helped his apprentices start printing businesses and retained a percentage when they succeeded, so he could afford to quit printing at an early age. He took up science and worked on electricity, communicating with scientists in Europe. His paper on positive and negative electricity was read before the Royal Society, and it is mentioned in Thomas Kuhn's book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" along with other revolutionary and important theories. His fame as a scientist gave him status that was tapped by Pennsylvania when they sent him as an agent to England. He spent years there trying to negotiate better arrangements for the American colonies, but became discouraged when things became worse as Parliament added more taxes. He finally returned to America, advocated separation from England, and helped to draft the Declaration of Independence. Then he was sent to France, at the time an enemy of England, as the first ambassador of our newly formed country, to ask for military help. At first the French thought us likely to lose, but after our victory in the battle of Saratoga, they agreed to send help, help that was decisive in the last battle of the Revolutionary War when a French fleet prevented defeated British troops from retreating to British ships, so they had to surrender. Franklin then helped to write the US Constitution. He was aware of the difficulty of steering our human future. When he left Independence Hall after the Constitutional Convention, a lady asked "Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?" Franklin replied: "A Republic, Madam, if you can keep it."

Franklin and other heroes of history have made our modern world work. They are an existence proof that such things are possible. The twists of history in the process show that the path has not been smooth, so we can project that it will not be smooth in the future. However, we have kept our Constitution now for 231 years, and it has inspired others around the world. Our history would have been rougher without it. If we keep working at it, perhaps we can find other good ideas that will make things even smoother. Franklin and the rest show us that it can be done.