

Prakash Kona

Possible, Probable, Plausible

It is hard to forget the intense expression and the emphasis with which the protagonist played by Henry Fonda utters the line "It's *possible!*" in the movie *Twelve Angry Men* (1957) to defend his point of view that the boy accused of murdering his father may in fact *not* be guilty. "But not very *probable*," responds one of the eleven men who disagree with him. The movie revolves around a group of men in a jury who are trying to arrive at the truth through the lens of their personal experiences. In the process each one has to deal with something in relation to his own private self before coming to what he thinks is the truth. It is not absolute truth that they are looking for but merely truth in the form of evidence beyond "reasonable doubt."

The interesting thing is that none of them ever really transcends the domain of his personhood. Each is conditioned by his personal background and the truth is colored by it. No one disagrees with the system where disagreements have to be worked out through argument and a healthy exchange of views. The movie is an attempt to offer a theory of human nature where being an individual is compatible with the idea of a democratic society.

The certainty of the claims of the witnesses that the boy is the murderer is suspect because the claims are based on implausible evidence. There are in fact less than enough grounds for a near certain perspective as far as the boy murdering his father is concerned. It is possible that the witnesses each saw something/someone that to their mind was probably the boy, and the plausibility of what they imagine to be the truth makes it, for them, *the* truth.

As a viewer of the film I was struck by the distinction between something being possible and *not* probable. The problem is compounded when we interject the term plausible in between the possible and the probable. I make the distinction between what is possible, probable and plausible in this manner: I thought I saw God in the pub last night: It is possible I saw something I thought was God, but improbable that I actually saw God; it is probable that I was hallucinating, and plausible that the lighting, sound and drink together created an effect that left me with the belief that I had seen God. An association of degrees of certainty to each one of them enables the meaningful use of these words and avoids confusion.

A possibility is infinite, while a probability is bound by the laws of finitude. The plausible, however, comes close to the Greek idea of fate: something lingering in the dark, ready to pounce on one with the speed of a cheetah that has identified its prey. There's a web of plausibility built into Oedipus' unknowing murder of his father and marriage to his mother. Among the Greeks, even the gods are mere objects of play before that sense of fatality that is in the nature of things. The notion of man is, however, a different one. Man is always dabbling with the probable and daring to confront the possible. Knowledge lies in the awareness that a man cannot alter his fate and ultimately must be confined to the plausible. He must remain in respectful awe of what is possible and ensure that he is mentally prepared for what is probable.

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Imagination is the only thing that can make the universe look puny. Nothing dare defy the imagination, which is the kingdom of the possible. Poets and dreamers reign in the imagination, where they are the owners of daydreams and purveyors of fantasies. Philosophers, though, are doomed to the realm of the probable – the “No Man’s Land” between the “dogma” of Religion and the “definite knowledge” of Science that Bertrand Russell speaks of in his introduction to *The History of Western Philosophy* (15). That is probably why we attach the term “philosopher” – not always without a hint of derision – to anyone without a sense of humor, and who asks a lot of speculative questions. We like to take the world for granted. I don’t want to look at the probability that since it has a beginning the world must have an ending as well. Mathematicians and musicians though haunted by the impossible are condemned to remain in the plausible. The mathematician needs solutions to problems while the musician must compose out of the heart’s fullness. Both reside in the borderlands that exist between the possible and the probable though they are, technically speaking, passport holders of the nation-state populated by probability-seekers.

What is possible, probable or plausible beyond reasonable doubt is germane to how we understand reality and truth. Is the world real or is it a mere possibility invented by a mind capable of producing an infinite number of illusions of all permutations and combinations? What is truth beyond a point but mere probability? Historians are at best theorists dealing with the plausible. Take, for instance, an accidental death of a prominent person, which acquires historic significance. There are twenty onlookers to the accident of whom some are chosen to be witnesses. It is the evidence of the witness that ought to establish whatever it is that is beyond reasonable doubt. The witness, whose testimony is used by the historian, must be tested on grounds of plausibility. The reasonable doubt has to be clarified.

In the case of Othello, the prototypical suspicious husband in Shakespeare’s play, the doubt is an unreasonable one and so no serious clarification is possible. He does not need to be logically convinced that his wife is guilty of adultery because somewhere deep down he already subscribes to the possibility that his wife is capable of cheating on him with another man and that she will do it given half the chance. In other words, it is womankind that Othello has issues with and not any one particular woman.

Othello’s problem is a fundamental one that we see in most men on this planet. Men are obsessed with certainty just as women are inclined to relativity. Women don’t make a specific distinction between the social and the physical universe; they tend to see an intrinsic connection between the two. Their worlds are not divided into the existential as opposed to the personal. How we relate to one another is how we relate to the universe – that’s how most women look at it.

Men wish to be certain both in love and in life. Unfortunately for them, what is possible is infinite. Women understand that certainty is a man-made myth. Their idea of infinite possibilities is to explore the nuances of the language we use to talk about ourselves in relation to those around us. What is possible in a woman’s world is usually implausible in a man’s world. A man can perhaps never completely understand why a woman

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feels bad or happy about the littlest of things like remembering a birthday or an anniversary.

Ultimately, our sense of certainty is connected to the kind of society we live in and the nature of our personal relationships. What is possible can always be looked at as being both probable as well as plausible. Relativity is inherent in all attempts to find certain knowledge. In looking for certain proof of his wife's unfaithfulness Othello falls into the trap that most men fall into – the trap of looking for knowledge that transcends the boundaries of the possible, the probable or the plausible.

Faith or belief in another person is paradoxically the only certainty that is offered to humankind. It is possible that I could be betrayed. It is probable that my faith in fact is naivety of some kind, a refusal to face the truth. Those who subscribe to the view that human nature is a good one tend to fall into the category of believers bordering the naïve. Overconfident men used to occupy positions of power also suffer from a surfeit of belief in their own abilities. At the end of their days, Nero and Caligula must have had the faces of spoiled children afraid that their toys will be taken away from them. It is plausible that my faith will cost me dear in real terms because I refuse to be guided by practical evidence and focus instead on my ideals. In his last days, Mahatma Gandhi with his obsessive belief in human goodness and in his own abilities to bring about change was something like that.

A craving for the impossible is like the yearning for the unicorn. If the unicorn did not exist, we would have to invent it. The unicorn is not real, but comes out of a real need. It is not just a possibility. It is both probable as well as plausible. The unicorns in the head are almost the same as the ones outside the head. I often wonder if that is what keeps most people going on on this planet: the unicorn. Our conquests and our defeats are connected to the unicorn. Boundless love, eternal youth or the desire for fame – that's the shape of the unicorn in the real world. There would be neither depressions nor disappointments in the absence of the unicorn. Some days my heart is filled with unicorns. Other days there are no unicorns in sight. At both times I am ready to lose myself. I need the unicorn to be myself. Was Ramesses the Great thinking of the unicorn at the end of his long reign, when he almost managed to convince his subjects of his near-divine status? It is plausible that he was.

My personal predilection is for the possible. I began life with the possible: to my imagination everything seemed to be within the bounds of the achievable. Even the possible, was finite. I slowly aged over time. At thirty, once again I was struck by a sense of the possible. A death-like ecstasy pervaded my soul. Like Adam banished from Paradise I had to leave the Eden of possibilities and enter the purgatory of probabilities. The unicorns haunted me once in a way. I was however willing to exchange the unicorns of my day dreams with horses or even the donkeys of the real world. It was flesh and blood that made me embark on the cruel journey from the possible to the probable. In my forties I encountered the plausible. It was one heroic attempt to reconcile the opposites of my life. I wanted to be a rebel and a conservative at the same time. I wanted to fall in love and not break my heart. I wanted to run faster than a stag and not hurt my feet. I wanted to live but I did not want to suffer. Like the Henry

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Fonda character in *Twelve Angry Men* I wanted to live a controlled life dedicated to causes that nobody else cared for. I failed the test of plausibility.

By nature, I am a doubter of evidence. This is why I have never been able to submit to the idea of anything being beyond reasonable doubt. Everything is within the bounds of reasonable doubt. You can't be reasonable and doubt at the same time. I would make a terrible judge, not to mention a worse lawyer. For someone like me who sees possibilities everywhere, the possibility of innocence is always greater than the possibility of guilt. In the court of law that is under my supervision nobody gets prosecuted. It is a court that doubts the nature of the evidence that claims to be beyond reasonable doubt. Since evidence is a piece of fiction, ideally everybody gets to be pardoned. Critics would say that this plausible scenario I have created is improbable because it delves too deep into the realm of what is possible as opposed to the probable.

They are not opposites – the possible and the probable. They share a dialectical relationship where one is dependent on the other for its existence. Possibilities have to exist in order for probabilities to be meaningful. In philosophical terms, the possible stands for the *necessary* while the probable stands for the *essential*. One is a need and the other has an essence or intrinsic character of its own that makes it desirable. Both of them can be overwhelming unless we have the plausible which combines the best of the possible and the probable while retaining its own identity.

What lies beyond reasonable doubt is just a possibility of another doubt lingering in the vacuum outside this gaseous state we call the universe. If everything can be doubted, it would be logically absurd to look for certainty. Therefore, it is incumbent as creatures of reason that we look for reasonableness as a guiding principle in life. Personally I am a celebrant of the absurd. The quest for certainty is a quest for the Holy Grail or some such unattainable object or notion which might make life exciting provided that you have no other means to amuse yourself. My interest in anything that is not connected with people, which I restrict to the areas that I cover with my feet in a day, can only be a remotely mental one. Technology might have made the world a smaller place but my contention is that we have always lived only in small worlds. Alexander, Timur the Lame or Napoleon – they are small world people imagining big things.

The advantage of inhabiting a small world is that you become more conscious of how you think about and use language. It would be logical to say that there are impossible people in this world. It is improbable that there are people who think that anything is possible. It is implausible that you will probably not meet at least one impossible person in your entire life. Small worlds abound in contradictions rather than certainties. You have to learn the art of subtlety in those worlds because people have a notion that life is permanent one way or the other. We talk of a permanent job, a house that will last as long as the pyramids and relationships that are meant to be forever. Expectations are defeated while hopes continue to be regenerated.

The young see poetry everywhere. Prose is a denominator of age where there is an insistence upon clarity and a refusal of the ambiguity of metaphor that dominated youth. What is plausible is prosaic, and what is

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possible must be poetic – the feeling that one can touch the stars. Creative fiction is where truth is made to look like a probability. A diary, as close as it may come to an autobiography of thoughts, is a book of regrets. Regrets are unexplored possibilities, the doors we never opened, the windows through which we were afraid to look, the houses that in the end became prisons because we did not venture naked into the streets and forests like Saint Francis, who lived in the open without limits. While drama is about probabilities, it is in fiction, which holds up a mirror to our existence, that we recognize the plausible. Life ought to be stranger than fiction; it cannot be any other way because it is in life that we see fiction competing with the truth.

What the twelve men are angry about in the movie is the difficulties that possibilities throw in the face of the attempt to think clearly. It is a justified anger because of the effort involved in transforming a possibility into a probability and making it look like a plausibility. These are heroic attempts where one's reason or the ability to look at the world intelligently has to make peace with one's feelings of empathy. The angry men rise above their negative feelings making space for empathy. What follows next is the principle of reasonableness that combines analysis with empathy. The doubt is an emotional one, as all doubts are. What is beyond the doubt, making it unreasonable, is evidence – not as an object lying out there, but in the manner in which we perceive the world and arrive at the truth through a perception.

Confucius says: what cannot be altered is a possibility; what could be altered is a probability; what can neither be altered nor not altered is plausibility. I cannot alter the possibility of my death. I could alter the probability of falling ill through a healthy lifestyle. What can neither be altered nor not altered is the nature of living. I wake up in the morning not because I have made the choice to be awake. I wake up because that is how nature has constituted my body. I am experiencing the possibility of being alive, packaged with joys and pains, each morning my eyes encounter daylight. At the end of the day my life is not about the probability of being a winner or loser. I refuse to be caught in a simple opposition such as winning or losing. At the end of the day is the beginning of the night. That I could go to bed without allowing the oppressive heat of the day to mar my system gives a sense of plausibility to the possibility of my waking up the next day to face reality anew.

Works Cited

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