

“From your perspective, what is intriguing about plausibility?”

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The notion of plausibility normally comes up in the context of distinguishing it from the related notions of probability and possibility. What I feel sets it somewhat apart from these two is that it is fundamentally normative in a way that the other two are not. Theoretically, at least, we can ‘prove’ that certain futures, or at least aspects of them, are possible, or, more often, impossible, which implies either a zero or non-zero probability. Certainly, the notion of what is possible can change as our understanding of the world changes, but there is some notion of how this might occur that fits within the concepts of ‘positive’ science.

When we turn to the question of plausibility, though, we cross over a qualitative bridge. While anything that is clearly impossible should also be considered implausible to all, it is not clear that within the realm of the possible that which is plausible to one person is also plausible to another. Obviously there is some relationship between plausibility and probability – it is easier to accept that something is more plausible if it can be shown to be more probable. This, however, presumes that probabilities, other than zero or non-zero, can be assigned to particular futures or aspects of them. Much of what we have come to understand about the way that the world works and, in particular, how people behave, is not amenable to this type of precision. This is seen, in part, in the increasing use of Bayesian vs. Frequentist approaches to thinking about complex systems.

Still, while a Bayesian approach moves us some way in the direction of plausibility versus possibility, I feel that it does not get us all the way there. First, while I argued in the previous paragraph that there is some relationship between probable and plausible, this is characterized by a certain degree of asymmetry – increasing probability should increase plausibility, but it is not clear that reducing probability necessarily implies reducing plausibility. Plausibility is more about telling a believable story than proving likelihood. Second, one does not generally ask ‘possible or probable to whom’ whereas to ask about plausibility almost always implies someone’s judgment.

Taken together, these highlight the very normative and ‘political’ nature of the notion of plausibility. We use arguments about plausibility to introduce or exclude certain possibilities into our discourse. Our ability to do so can, on one hand, transform the seemingly impossible into the inevitable, or, on the other hand, turn the seemingly inevitable into the very unlikely.