Selecting Chance Curation Strategies: Is Chance Curation Related to the Richness of a Cognitive Niche?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to tackle the following issue: as it is renown that chances can be faked, it seems intuitive to think that the inhibition of chance-faking contexts is a good activity of chance curation. Yet, could this activity sometimes be counterproductive? The question will be answered positively considering the case of bullshit as a case of fake chances, but also as a fertile ground for learning and developing intuitions. Ultimately, this paper will argue that the peculiar context, that is the cognitive niche supporting the (potentially) fake chances, is the discriminating factor: indeed, a rich cognitive niche may benefit from certain kind of fake chances – which should therefore not be inhibited – whereas a poorer niche might not benefit from this situation, and therefore the preclusion of fake chances is an act of chance curation in those contexts.

Keywords: Affordance, Bullshit, Chance Curation, Cognitive Niche, Learning

1. ECO-COGNITIVE CHANCE DISCOVERY, ABDUCTION, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANCE CURATION

As defined by Oshawa and McBurney (2003), a chance is a new event or situation conveying both an opportunity and a risk in the future. Recently, a number of contributions have acknowledged the abductive dimension of seeking chances with relation to science (Magnani, 2005, Abe, 2009). As maintained by Magnani and Bardone (2008) and Abe (2009), the process of chance detection (and creation) is resulting from an inferential process – mainly abductive – in which the agent exploits latent clues and signs signaling or informing the presence of an action opportunity (Magnani & Bardone, 2008). In this case, as argued by Magnani (2009) the abductive inferential dimension has to be considered beyond its sentential/computational one.

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According to Peirce, an inference is a form of sign activity in which the word sign encompasses several types of sign, for instance, symbol, feeling, image, conception, and other representation (Peirce, 1931-1958, 5.283). Moreover, the process of inferring – and so the activity of chance seeking and extracting – is carried out in a distributed and hybrid way (Magnani, 2009). This approach considers cognitive systems in terms of their environmental situatedness: instead of being used to build a comprehensive inner model of its surroundings, the agent’s perceptual capacities are seen as simply used to obtain “what-ever” specific pieces of information are necessary for its behavior in the world. The agent constantly “adjusts” its vantage point, updating and refining its procedures, in order to uncover a piece of information. This resort to the need of specifying how to efficiently examine and explore and to the need of “interpreting” an object of a certain type. It is a process of attentive and controlled perceptual exploration through which the agent is able to collect the necessary information: a purposeful moving through what is being examined, actively picking up information rather than passively transducing (Thomas, 1999). In this sense, humans like other creatures are ecological engineers, because they do not simply live their environment, but they actively shape and change it looking for suitable chances, epistemic for example, like in the case of scientific abductive thinking.

Generally speaking, the activity of chance-seeking as a plastic behavior is administered at the eco-cognitive level through the construction and maintenance of the so-called cognitive niches (Magnani, 2009). The various cognitive niches humans live in are responsible for delivering those clues and signs informing about a (environmental) chance. So, the mediating activity of inferring as sign activity takes place and is enhanced because of the presence of the so-called eco-cognitive inheritance system (Magnani, 2009; Odling-Smee, Laland, & Feldman, 2003). That is, humans can benefit from the various eco-cognitive innovations as forms of environmental modifications brought about and preserved by the previous generations. Indeed, many chance-seeking capacities are not wired by evolution, but enter one’s behavioral repertoire because they are secured not at the genetic level, but at the eco-cognitive one – in the cognitive niches. The second important point to mention is that humans as chance extractors act like eco-cognitive engineers (Magnani & Bardone, 2008; Bardone, 2011). Accordingly, they take part in the process of extracting chances by performing smart manipulation in order to turn an external constraint into a part of their extended cognitive system.

Chances are provided by the continuous eco-cognitive activity of humans as chance extractors, but all human agents do not stand at the same level: some individuals, in fact, do not only explore and make use of the chances available in their ecologies, but also take care of them. If chance discovery (and chance utilization) are, as we contend, inferential tasks, then the quality of these inferences heavily depends on the quality of available chances. As suggested by Abe (2010), chance discovery is coupled by an activity of chance curation: deriving the word from the museum jargon, Abe remarks that the “main task of curator is a curatorial task, which is multifaceted. Curator comes from a Latin word ‘cura’ which means cure [and care]. Then originally it was used for a person who takes care of a cultural heritage” (p. 794). The word was subsequently applied to the person who takes care of data in IT settings:

They use “data curation” because they think data have value. Not only for keeping data but also usability of data for the public, they use the word “curation”. Actually, most of data are neither art works nor archaeological artifacts. However, it is important to view data from the aspect of what should be preserved (p. 795).

Following this extension, Abe defines “curation” as the “task to offer users opportunities to discover chances”. This will be our starting point. If indeed “curation” may describe the intentional offering of chance discovery to
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