

The Butterfly Perspective
by
Robert Rietschel, July 24, 2023

You probably have heard of the Butterfly Effect. The original idea said that the beating of a butterfly's wings on one side of the earth could lead to violent weather on the other side. Like a tornado or hurricane. This would be accomplished by the downstream events magnifying those slight air movements caused by the flight of a butterfly. It is a way of saying that all events are interconnected in ways that have far-reaching consequences. You could consider that it is an exaggeration made in furtherance of the notion that we all matter and that even our meager actions are important.

How about a reality check? If the butterfly is to represent a seemingly inconsequential human, then we are all butterflies. A world of butterflies with beating wings. Each stirring the air, and each can claim to be the one butterfly that caused that hurricane on the other side of the planet. Who's to say it wasn't so? Would all the butterflies that caused the hurricane please raise one wing? A whole planet of butterflies now has one wing raised. Can they all be right? If we view their action as the cause of the hurricane, the collective wind created by all of their wings flapping, maybe we would have to concede that the butterflies get credit for creating hurricane-fostering conditions. In a sense, each butterfly deserves some credit. A one in eight billionth credit given the world population. Give all eight billion a participation trophy.

This story lacks something. That is: No known set of conditions that any set of men or animals can create has been shown to cause tornados or hurricanes. It is easier to connect ocean temperature to hurricanes. The metaphor is not meant to be literal. Does that reduce us back to inconsequential beings? My answer will be no because I'm not that pessimistic.

The actions of a butterfly may have ramifications for the spreading of pollen and plant propagation, it may cause elation in a poet and lead to inspirational literature. The actions have consequences that the butterfly could not foresee. Yet, the butterfly must be given credit.

The butterfly effect is something that acts locally and causes changes in a small framework. Since everything is interconnected, those actions matter, and the downstream effect may be far more profound than anything contemplated or appreciated by the architect of the changes. We are all that butterfly, having small effects on the immediate environment we inhabit. We may not intend or appreciate the way those perturbations impact others.

Did the bum that passed out on the street and broke his bottle of Mogen David 20/20 cause a passerby to swear off alcohol? Did that person who quit alcohol go on to become someone of consequence to many? Maybe that person decided to dedicate themselves to helping those with substance abuse issues. That butterfly bum didn't intend to do that and will probably never know the role they played in this chain of events.

And there it is. A chain of events is the term we give to the metaphorical beating of a butterfly's wings. Some small event starts the ball rolling and it snowballs into a movement. The movement changes the course of history. The event that started the chain reaction is long lost in this process. But we are back to our metaphor of the inconsequential not existing. There is a consequence to everything. The concept is valid if only in our minds.

What happens to most actions? There is a minor ripple in the stream, and it quietly fades away. Then there are ripples that summate into tsunamis. Lives are lost, cities are destroyed. In a world of eight billion people, most local actions will act like most ripples in a stream. A minor, temporary alteration is

all that will be noticed. But there will be things that might be world-altering. Students of the history of World War II know that Hitler fancied himself an artist in Vienna. He received no encouragement. What if he had? A kind word, a patron who wished to see more. A career leading to artwork that might hang in Belvedere Palace next to Klimt's. If only there had been such a butterfly.

The nature of the Butterfly Effect is that the action of consequence is indistinguishable from the butterfly's perspective from any ordinary other action. The butterfly will never know it was the cause of the hurricane. If the butterfly dared to think of itself as so powerful, it would be considered by those butterflies surrounding it as having delusions of grandeur. Perhaps of suffering from a bad case of hubris. We are all the butterfly with a case of hubris and at the same time, we are the butterflies who dismiss our fellow butterflies as someone inconsequential. None of us will ever have the perspective to know when or where some simple act will have tremendous consequences. The pessimist would say that means none of our actions matter. But that would miss the entirely the small action that changes history. I chose to believe that those small things are very real, they happen without our knowledge, and that means that everything matters. So, I would suggest acting locally with regard for yourself and your fellow man as being important. You will not have the perspective to see what action proved critical or might have begun one of those chain reactions.

Perhaps you don't believe that. Maybe you think that folks know when they are changing the course of history. I would suggest you think back to all the people whose work was discovered after they had died. Work that you were being taught in school. It was considered important enough that hundreds of years later, you were getting graded on your understanding of what they did. In their time, no one took notice. The starving artist who starved, but his painting just sold for millions at auction. You've heard of such, right? He died thinking his work was inconsequential or perhaps just unappreciated. Now it is revered. You won't have the perspective to see the Butterfly Effect, but the metaphor has merit, and it should inform you as to how to live your life.

Click here to email your comments to Bob: rrietschel@aol.com