

Overcompensation and Overreaction Everywhere

*Is it easy to write on a Heathrow runway?—Try to get the Pope to ban your work
—How to beat up an economist (but not too hard, just enough to go to jail)*

My own domain dependence was revealed to me one day as I was sitting in the office of David Halpern, a U.K. government advisor and policy maker. He informed me—in response to the idea of antifragility—of a phenomenon called post-traumatic growth, the opposite of post-traumatic stress syndrome, by which people harmed by past events surpass themselves. I had never heard about it before, and, to my great shame, had never made the effort to think of its existence: there is a small literature but it is not advertised outside a narrow discipline. We hear about the more lurid post-traumatic disorder, not post-traumatic growth, in the intellectual and so-called learned vocabulary. But popular culture has an awareness of its equivalent, revealed in the expression “it builds character.” So do the ancient Mediterranean classics, along with grandmothers.

Intellectuals tend to focus on negative responses from randomness (fragility) rather than the positive ones (antifragility). This is not just in psychology: it prevails across the board.

How do you innovate? First, try to get in trouble. I mean serious, but not terminal, trouble. I hold—it is beyond speculation, rather a conviction—that innovation and sophistication spark from initial situations of necessity, in ways that go far beyond the satisfaction of such necessity (from the unintended side effects of, say, an initial invention or attempt at invention). Naturally, there are classical thoughts on the subject, with a Latin saying that sophistication is born out of hunger (*artificia docuit fames*). The idea pervades classical literature: in Ovid, difficulty is what wakes up the genius (*ingenium mala saepe movent*), which translates in Brooklyn English into “When life gives you a lemon ...”

The excess energy released from overreaction to setbacks is what innovates!

This message from the ancients is vastly deeper than it seems. It contradicts modern methods and ideas of innovation and progress on many levels, as we tend to think that innovation comes from bureaucratic funding, through planning, or by putting people through a Harvard Business School class by one Highly Decorated Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship (who never innovated anything) or hiring a consultant (who never innovated anything). This is a fallacy—note for now the disproportionate contribution of *uneducated* technicians and entrepreneurs to various technological leaps, from the Industrial Revolution to the emergence of Silicon Valley, and you will see what I mean.

Yet in spite of the visibility of the counterevidence, and the wisdom you can pick up free of charge from the ancients (or grandmothers), moderns try today to create inventions from situations of comfort, safety, and predictability instead of accepting the notion that “necessity really is the mother of invention.”