

Cause and Effect



Feeling brainy, Alex Denton ponders this oldest of symbiotic relationships, and wonders what lessons can be learnt from *The Volcano*.

Even as I typed last month's column - my fingers clattering like ghost train teeth - dark clouds were forming over Europe, filling the skies with ash and forming the canvas upon which I found the genus of this month's musings. For six days, the skies in Europe were shut down as an Icelandic Volcano - Eyjafjallajökull, for those reading this out



loud and relish a challenge of enunciation - spewed forth its guts - for where else is magma than in the belly of a mountain?

Rising from beneath a glacier's shrouding layer of ice, it released a bilious cloud of ash that spread itself thickly across most of Northern Europe, causing European authorities to close its airspace as a precaution.

And such severe disruption has reminded me - Dear Reader - of something fundamental but too often

forgot: the laws of cause and effect; and that to every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction.

Those readers that are less familiar with the crystalline world of physics may not recognise this last as Newton's third law, his law of reciprocal actions, but in essence it explains that it is impossible to do anything without there being some equal but opposite consequence. When the volcano stack blew with the seismic force of ancient geology, it was inevitable that there would follow equally powerful repercussions.

So, it cost the airlines nearly a billion dollars, pushing some of them perilously close to the edge of insolvency, and business as a whole lost even more

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because of the deals that weren't done and the cargo that wasn't shipped. There were reports of desperate husbands/wives/children/parents missing births and deaths, marriages and funerals, of stranded school children missing exams and of surgeons forced to cancel operations. It was a mess.

You might think that a natural disaster is an untrue example of Newton's law enacting its wrath against a world - and you'd be right. For a start these consequences were not necessarily physically connected to the original cause. But that is precisely my point; so little in life, unlike in physics, ever or actually is.

We all took air travel for granted for too long and have built a world around it whereby, were the facility to ever be removed, huge sections of society would

grind to a halt. And so it is with everything else. There are unintended consequences to everything we do and we seem to have lost sight of what these consequences might be were a disruptive force ever be applied to the way in which we live our lives.

A friend recently took a tumble and hurt herself quite badly. She's fine, but as a consequence of that fall, she has had to cancel a trip and severely curtail her plans for the next couple of months. Another friend, older and more fragile as it turns out, moved to Bahrain for the sun and to give his retirement fund a final push. He was taken ill, and spent all of his savings on medical care he would have received for free at home.

My point is not that anyone is to blame in any of this, but that *The Ash* reminded me that all too often we live our lives taking too many things for granted. We assume that everything will stay the same, that X, Y or Z will still be there tomorrow as it was

today, never even thinking that it could ever be taken away. And we feel bereft when it is gone, its possibility no longer even part of our lives.

My best friend's father passed away recently, and the word he used to describe his grief was bereft: a suffering of unrequited love, according to the OED. And although I seem to have finished this column in quite a different place to where I began, it does seem appropriate to me that the feeling we denizens of the 21st century should be feeling in the shadow of *The Volcano* is grief: a mourning for a belief - now gone - we once enjoyed about our absolute mastery of nature. It is hard to know we can lose control so easily, and we miss our sense of certainty ■

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