



Introduction

The phrase ‘butterfly effect’ is now in common use to describe a situation where a very small cause can produce a large effect after some time. Mathematically, a small change in the present state of the system grows exponentially, i.e., is multiplied by a fixed factor in equal intervals of time. Such behaviour had been noticed earlier in mathematical models and in celestial mechanics by people like Lyapunov and Poincaré. But it is fair to say that Lorenz’s work, rooted in something as practical as weather forecasting, showed that this was not a mathematical curiosity.

The difficulties of weather prediction are proverbial. R K Laxman brought this out in one of his cartoons of a Mumbai bus queue in heavy rains in which only one man is without an umbrella. And clearly irritated by his neighbour’s question, he is saying, “Yes, I work for the meteorological department. How did you know?”

For this issue’s ‘Classics’ we reproduce, from the website of MIT, Lorenz’s own university, the text of a famous lecture which he delivered¹. The proverbial butterfly occurs in the title of the talk which was given to a rather general audience. Interestingly, the sensitive dependence on initial conditions is only part of the talk, although it is that part which caught the imagination of the scientific and general public. For a careful perspective of what this effect is and how it might impact weather prediction as seen in 1972, read on!

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¹ Address at the American Association for this Advancement of Science at 10:00 a.m. December 29, 1972. 139th Meeting at Sheraton Park Hotel, Wilmington Room, AAAS Section on Environmental Sciences, New Approaches to Global Weather: GARP (The Global Atmospheric Research Program).

Source: http://eaps4.mit.edu/research/Lorenz/Butterfly_1972.pdf



Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set off a Tornado in Texas?

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Lest I appear frivolous in even posing the title question, let alone suggesting that it might have an affirmative answer, let me try to place it in proper perspective by offering two propositions.

1. If a single flap of a butterfly's wings can be instrumental in generating a tornado, so also can all the previous and subsequent flaps of its wings, as can the flaps of the wings of millions of other butterflies, not to mention the activities of innumerable more powerful creatures, including our own species.
2. If the flap of a butterfly's wings can be instrumental in generating a tornado, it can equally well be instrumental in preventing a tornado.

More generally, I am proposing that over the years minuscule disturbances neither increase nor decrease the frequency of occurrence of various weather events such as tornados; the most that they may do is to modify the sequence in which these events occur. The question which really interests us is whether they can do even this – whether, for example, two particular weather situations differing by as little as the immediate influence of a single butterfly will generally after sufficient time evolve into two situations differing by as much as the presence of a tornado. In more technical language, is the behavior of the atmosphere *unstable* with respect to perturbations of small amplitude?

The connection between this question and our ability to predict the weather is evident. Since we do not know exactly how many butterflies there are, nor where they are all located, let alone which ones are flapping their wings at any instant, we cannot, if the answer to our question is affirmative, accurately predict the occurrence of tornados at a sufficiently distant future time. More significantly, our general failure to detect systems even as large as thunderstorms when they slip between weather stations may impair our ability to predict the general weather pattern even in the near future.

How can we determine whether the atmosphere is unstable? The atmosphere is not a



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controlled laboratory experiment; if we disturb it and then observe what happens, we shall never know what would have happened if we had not disturbed it. Any claim that we can learn what would have happened by referring to the weather forecast would imply that the question whose answer we seek has already been answered in the negative.

The bulk of our conclusions are based upon computer simulation of the atmosphere. The equations to be solved represent our best attempts to approximate the equations actually governing the atmosphere by equations which are compatible with present computer capabilities. Generally two numerical solutions are compared. One of these is taken to simulate the actual weather, while the other simulates the weather which would have evolved from slightly different initial conditions, i.e., the weather which would have been predicted with a perfect forecasting technique but imperfect observations. The difference between the solutions therefore simulates the error in forecasting. New simulations are continually being performed as more powerful computers and improved knowledge of atmospheric dynamics become available.

Although we cannot claim to have proven that the atmosphere is unstable, the evidence that it is so is overwhelming. The most significant results are the following.

1. Small errors in the coarser structure of the weather pattern – those features which are readily resolved by conventional observing networks – tend to double in about three days. As the errors become larger the growth-rate subsides. This limitation alone would allow us to extend the range of acceptable prediction by three days every time we cut the observation error in half, and would offer the hope of eventually making good forecasts several weeks in advance.
2. Small errors in the finer structure – e.g., the positions of individual clouds – tend to grow much more rapidly, doubling in hours or less. This limitation alone would not seriously reduce our hopes for extended-range forecasting, since ordinarily we do not forecast the finer structure at all.
3. Errors in the finer structure, having attained appreciable size, tend to induce errors in the coarser structure. This result, which is less firmly established than the previous ones, implies that after a day or so there will be appreciable errors in the coarser structure, which will thereafter grow just as if they had been present initially. Cutting the observation error in the finer structure in half – a formidable task – would extend the range of acceptable prediction of even the coarser structure only by hours or less. The hopes for predicting two weeks or more in advance are thus greatly diminished.



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4. Certain special quantities such as weekly average temperatures and weekly total rainfall may be predictable at a range at which entire weather patterns are not.

Regardless of what any theoretical study may imply, conclusive proof that good day-to-day forecasts can be made at a range of two weeks or more would be afforded by any valid demonstration that any particular forecasting scheme generally yields good results at that range. To the best of our knowledge, no such demonstration has ever been offered. Of course, even pure guesses will be correct a certain percentage of the time.

Returning now to the question as originally posed, we notice some additional points not yet considered. First of all, the influence of a single butterfly is not only a fine detail – it is confined to a small volume. Some of the numerical methods which seem to be well adapted for examining the intensification of errors are not suitable for studying the dispersion of errors from restricted to unrestricted regions. One hypothesis, unconfirmed, is that the influence of a butterfly's wings will spread in turbulent air, but not in calm air.

A second point is that Brazil and Texas lie in opposite hemispheres. The dynamical properties of the tropical atmosphere differ considerably from those of the atmosphere in temperate and polar latitudes. It is almost as if the tropical atmosphere were a different fluid. It seems entirely possible that an error might be able to spread many thousands of miles within the temperate latitudes of either hemisphere, while yet being unable to cross the equator.

We must therefore leave our original question unanswered for a few more years, even while affirming our faith in the instability of the atmosphere. Meanwhile, today's errors in weather forecasting cannot be blamed entirely nor even primarily upon the finer structure of weather patterns. They arise mainly from our failure to observe even the coarser structure with near completeness, our somewhat incomplete knowledge of the governing physical principles, and the inevitable approximations which must be introduced in formulating these principles as procedures which the human brain or the computer can carry out. These shortcomings cannot be entirely eliminated, but they can be greatly reduced by an expanded observing system and intensive research. It is to the ultimate-purpose of making not exact forecasts but the best forecasts which the atmosphere is willing to have us make that the Global Atmospheric Research Program is dedicated.

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