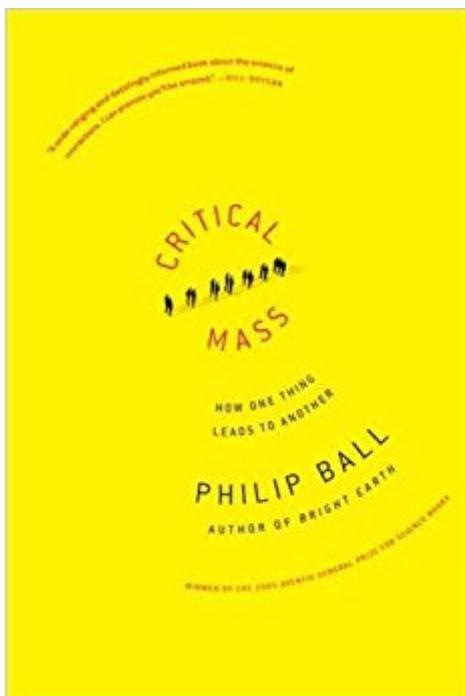


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Critical Mass: How One Thing Leads To Another



Synopsis

Are there "natural laws" that govern the ways in which humans behave and organize themselves, just as there are physical laws that govern the motions of atoms and planets? Unlikely as it may seem, such laws now seem to be emerging from attempts to bring the tools and concepts of physics into the social sciences. These new discoveries are part of an old tradition. In the seventeenth century the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, dismayed by the impending civil war in England, decided that he would work out what kind of government was needed for a stable society. His solution sparked a new way of thinking about human behavior in looking for the "scientific" rules of society. Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Auguste Comte, and John Stuart Mill pursued this idea from different political perspectives. But these philosophers lacked the tools that modern physics can now bring to bear on the matter. Philip Ball shows how, by using these tools, we can understand many aspects of mass human behavior. Once we recognize that we do not make most of our decisions in isolation but are affected by what others decide, we can start to discern a surprising and perhaps even disturbing predictability in our laws, institutions, and customs. Lively and compelling, *Critical Mass* is the first book to bring these new ideas together and to show how they fit within the broader historical context of a rational search for better ways to live.

Book Information

Paperback: 528 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (May 16, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374530416

ISBN-13: 978-0374530419

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.4 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars Â See all reviews Â (33 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #214,509 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #107 in Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > War & Peace #916 in Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Ethics & Morality #1159 in Â Books > Science & Math > History & Philosophy

Customer Reviews

Readers of "Critical Mass" by Philip Ball will learn many new concepts and ideas from a skilled science writer with a doctorate in physics. His book opens with brief historical account that weaves

the political confusion that engulfed Britain in the seventeenth century into early developments of science, but it is with the work of Thomas Hobbes that the author is particularly concerned. Although others had imagined ideal societies - Plato's "Republic", Thomas More's "Utopia", and Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis" come to mind - Hobbes attempted to deduce the laws of society from basic postulates in the manner that Isaac Newton had recently managed to explain planetary motion. In other words, Hobbes sought to establish a "physics of society" which is also the aim of Ball's book. Sensitive to charges of "arrogance", Ball asserts that his work is "not an attempt to prescribe systems of control and governance, still less to bolster with scientific reasoning prejudices about how society ought to be run." Rather he would help us to understand how "patterns of behavior emerge - and patterns undoubtedly do emerge - from the statistical mêlée of many individuals doing their own idiosyncratic thing." Thus he uses the tools that have recently been developed in nonlinear science to understand collective social behavior. To this end, the historical introduction is followed by a discussion of the concept of probability and the corresponding growth of statistical physics that developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The general reader who would understand these important ideas will benefit from the early chapters which clearly expound the notion of a phase change (think of boiling water or melting ice).

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