

Contingency Rules: the Absence of Free Will

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On the way to San Diego this afternoon my wife reminded me that at an Adventist Forums meeting we would find ourselves in polite company, even sophisticated company. “Don’t try to be clever, witty or debonair,” she said.

“Just be yourself.”

Well I iced my bruises by reminding myself that I have addressed the San Diego Forum chapter on three previous occasions. The first was back in 1982 when Walt Fahlsing was in charge. I believe we met in a bowling alley. I’m not sure about a bowling alley as a venue for the Adventist Forums. On that occasion we were discussing Ellen White who probably did not approve of bowling alleys. Great place for drunks though . . . with gutters everywhere. (Don’t try to be witty, she said.)

In late 1983 I was permitted a return visit, and then it was a decade before we were together again to document in narrative form Tom Mostert’s defamation of the presidential nominee for the Southeastern California Conference constituency session of 1992. An abbreviated version of that talk appeared in an early issue of *Adventist Today*.

Arriving at today, it is sort of startling for me to notice that I have addressed this Forum chapter in three different decades and two different millennia: makes it sound . . . like . . . really awesome . . . dude.

But looking at a recent list of all the tapes that you have made available since 1980—that is awesome. That kind of dedication, stamina and the staying power of this chapter and its leader, Jim Kaatz, is amazing.

The Energizer Bunny comes to mind.

But before I launch, one correction. In the most recent San Diego Forum Chapter newsletter it says about the speaker that he “is the holder of a nearly useless masters degree in psychology from Pepperdine University.” I provided Jim Kaatz with

that poorly constructed sentence. It sounds as though there is something defective about Pepperdine’s programs. What I should have said (just in case my alma mater is listening) is that I earned a perfectly good Masters degree in psychology from Pepperdine but have made little use of it.

1. Introduction (The Joys of thinking)

Any Adventist Forum member knows that thinking is fun. Which is nice, because it is such a portable activity. But it can be dangerous. Thinking has spawned a lot of bastard children. Just browse the titles at any library or bookstore, especially sections that catalog the social, political and economic theorists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

No doubt each of you have a circumstance or context in which you do your best thinking—a favorite chair, driving on the freeway, lounging by the pool. Mine is while I’m washing dishes. (Real men wash dishes.) For some reason that is when I tend to ratiocinate most freely.

The problem is, at our house we regularly eat on paper plates. But for awhile last year we reverted to the hard stuff, and what follows is the result of that brief period of somewhat more gracious living.

In line with my thesis that there is no such thing as free will, you will realize that what I am saying was determined entirely by two factors: my genes and my history. So you may enjoy but not credit me for what you are beginning to hear. I am merely the point of intersect for this heresy.

One other sort of disclaimer: I have the luxury of writing as a layman. If I mess up real bad, I can be excused because I am untutored. On the other hand, if I do well . . .

I’ve been thinking for about thirty-five years now, and I am almost reconciled to the likelihood that I

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will die bewildered; because there does not appear to be an epistemology that is capable of facilitating the search for answers to the big questions.

Free will and free choice are pretty good-sized issues, but I have concluded tentatively that they are susceptible of logical scrutiny.

To lend this analysis a patina of scientific respectability, I am offering my opinion in the form of a null hypothesis: human beings do not have free will or free choice. My assertion can be easily disproved if any of you find (or point out) even one, solitary “free” choice floating around “somewhere out there, beneath the pale moonlight,” or anywhere else.

If I were *Saint* Doug, I would put it like this: “Behold I show you a mystery, what doth appear now hath been determined beforehand.”

2. Preparation different from Ellen’s

My focus on this topic brought to mind a Willie White story. Will said that J.N. Andrews approached his mother with a copy of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* one day in 1858, saying that it reminded him of some things that she had described as being shown to her in vision. Mrs. White took the volume from Andrews, Willie wrote later, hardly knowing what to do with it and put it on a high shelf, determined not to read it until she had written out what the Lord already had shown her about the great controversy in vision.

Unlike Ellen, I did write out my thoughts on free will *and then* perused recent works by Pulitzer-prize-winning, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, Daniel Dennett, Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University (perhaps the most prolific and witty writer on the subject of mind, consciousness and free will), Arthur Peacocke (Warden emeritus of the Society of Ordained Scientists, England) and a recent try by Hilary Bok, associate professor of philosophy at Pomona College. You can imagine my amusement to discover that Dennett, in his book entitled *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, had used an analogy from golf to make a point that I had made years earlier in an article

I wrote for *Golf Illustrated* entitled, “You Can Drive Without Lip Gloss.” The point we both made was that something done after the fact can influence something that happened earlier. In this case, continuing to stare momentarily at the spot where the ball was teed up, after striking the ball, can influence how the ball was struck and its subsequent flight, direction and speed. It is sort of a silly point (unless you are a golfer), however true; but I’ve discovered through some recent reading that philosophers are sometimes silly.

3. Philosophy and Golf

As disciplines, golf and philosophy are first cousins. (If you golf a lot, you either get good, get mad or get philosophical.) So it is no surprise that the most common-sense approach to the topic of free will I have found is from an entertainingly ribald novel about golf entitled *Dead Solid Perfect*, written by Dan Jenkins, who used to write frequently for *Sports Illustrated*.

Jenkins’ protagonist is Kenny Lee Puckett, of Fort Worth, Texas—a journeyman touring pro who finds himself after the second round atop the leader board of the U.S. Open. When his caddie suggests that if his seven iron out of the rough on the fourteenth hole hadn’t caromed off of a spectator’s purse and into the cup for an eagle three he would be in third place, Kenny Lee’s laconic response was: “What could’a happened, did.” The profundity of that good ol’ boy wit may sink in as we continue down some philosophical fairways.

Although part of my intention for this topic is to have some fun, be not deceived; my other interest is—as Wittgenstein might have put it—“to assist in the breaking of bad habits of thought.”

4. History of my interest

It was the theology of judgment around which I was raised that first had me interested—even concerned—about the issue of free will. Why, I used to ask my Sabbath School and religion teachers, would anyone choose to be the kind of person who

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would choose to be lost? The answer was always disappointing and usually indicated that the teachers never had meditated on the question of how we get to be who we are.

5. Skinner and Chomsky

Several years later, and several years ago, when I was in graduate school, Harvard psychology professor B.F. Skinner had just published his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. He and the outspoken linguist Noam Chomsky were at loggerheads over the determinism-versus-freedom-and-dignity issue. In my naiveté I was on the side of Chomsky and his “autonomous man.” I even sought out Skinner at Harvard, but had to settle for lunch with several of his graduate students—a lunch that turned into a debate. It was Harvard against Pepperdine. Guess who won? I didn’t lose because I was Pepperdine; I lost because I was mistaken.

Revisiting Chomsky’s “Case Against B.F. Skinner” in *The New York Review of Books* recently, I was astonished to discover how inherently absurd Chomsky could be in his criticism of Skinner’s determinism: “Perhaps,” wrote Chomsky, “as the classical literature of freedom and dignity sometimes suggests, *there is an intrinsic human inclination toward free creative inquiry* and productive work, and humans are not merely dull mechanisms formed by a history of reinforcement and behaving predictably with no intrinsic needs apart from the need for physiological satiation.”

“An *intrinsic* human inclination?” Chomsky didn’t even realize he was simply buttressing the nature side of the case for determinism!

It is a further irony that Chomsky’s stellar work in “generative grammar,” explaining how infants acquire language, reinforces the determinism he so assiduously rejects. He found that the logic of language is hardwired into the brains of infants—that a child does not develop language as the result of its parent’s reinforcement of the spontaneous sounds or babblings that successively approximate adult speech,

as Skinner had argued.

Were Skinner correct, the only way humans could have language would be if a prototypical human (Adam?) came along with language already on board or loaded. Otherwise who reinforced the word-like gurglings of the first baby? Even before that, with what language did the first man charm the first woman in a way that led to the first baby?—the only way that language can be passed along. Maybe I am being a little silly again; but, as most of us know, the language of love has many voices. (I can’t believe I thought, much less wrote, that last phrase. ‘Sounds like National Public Radio.’)

Although Skinner’s reinforcement model did not account for the development of language, he certainly had the better of the free-will argument. And in the context of the literary arts, he introduced his deterministic argument by quoting Samuel Butler: “a poet writes a poem as a hen lays an egg, and both feel better afterward.”

“Does the poet create, originate, initiate the thing called a poem, or is his behavior merely the product of his genetic and environmental histories?”

Skinner was mischievous enough to raise the question directly with the distinguished poet Archibald MacLeish, during a conference at Columbia University. “That leaves no place for me as a poet,” said MacLeish, and he would not discuss the matter further. But a few months later the poet read one of his creations for a presidential inauguration ceremony at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a poem that included these lines:

Oh, weep, they say, for freedom and dignity!
You’re not free; it’s your grandfather’s itch
you’re scratching.
You have no dignity: you’re not a man,
you’re a rat in a vat of rewards and punishments,
You think you’ve chosen the rewards: you
haven’t:
The rewards have chosen you.
Aye! Weep!

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Skinner was just paranoid enough to believe that with his poem MacLeish was alluding to the behaviorist's book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. And so he applied his deterministic analysis to the poetic enterprise. "Unlike a mother," or a hen, Skinner wrote,

the poet has access to his poem during gestation. He may tinker with it. A poem seldom makes its appearance in completed form. Bits and pieces *occur* to the poet, who rejects or allows them to stand, and who puts them together to *compose* a poem. But they come from his past history, verbal and otherwise, and he has had to learn how to put them together.

The poet often knows that some part of his history is contributing to the poem he is writing. He may, for example, reject a phrase because he sees that he has borrowed it from something he has read. But it is quite impossible for him to be aware of all his history, and it is in this sense that he does not know where his behavior comes from.

"Because the poet is not aware of the origins of his behavior," Skinner added, "he is likely to attribute it to a creative mind, an 'unconscious' mind, perhaps, or a mind belonging to someone else—to a muse, for example;" or, as Ellen White asserted, to "my angel guide." If I were a defense attorney, I could sense the germ of a plagiarism defense in gestation.

"What is threatened," Skinner concluded, "is the autonomy of the poet. The autonomous is the uncaused, and the uncaused is miraculous, and the miraculous is God."

6. Provonsha's Sabbath School class

In the 1970s and early 1980s, I frequently attended the Sabbath school class of then Loma Linda University physician/ethicist Jack Provonsha. Periodically he would offer free will or free choice to explain, as many theologians do, the common failure of petitionary prayer; why the red books and scripture

are replete with human error; why evil continues; why Jesus waits and what the great controversy is about.

On numerous occasions Provonsha described a circumstance that he believed provided the rather occasional opportunity for a truly free choice. He argued that every once in a while during a person's life she is confronted by a moral dilemma in which competing influences on both or all sides of an issue are perfectly balanced—"like a ping pong ball on the edge of a knife," he would put it. Such infrequent occasions, he insisted, provided the opportunity for a free moral choice.

But if the ethical arguments (pro and con) appear to the individual confronted by the choice to be equally balanced (really equally balanced), on what basis does the poor devil choose? With the toss of a coin? Eeny meeny miney moe? By pulling the petals from a posy?

I can't help but take a position precisely opposite the venerable professor. A choice in which the options are of equal merit, or perceived worth, is a choice—if it is a choice—of minimal significance as it pertains to the question of free will. And the more perfectly balanced the teeter-totter, the less significant is the influence required to tip the scales.

But a slightly imbalanced influence, or a coin-toss, it will require, unless the donkey wishes to starve to death between the two comparably aromatic hay bales. To repeat: options perceived by the individual to be of equal merit comprise a choice that is least likely to have significance for the issue of freedom and dignity.

That is not to argue that the road taken or the choice made—even by a flip of the coin—may not turn out to be of enormous consequence, just because the method of deciding is glib or arbitrary; not at all.

Now I don't want to move on past the Loma Linda theology without a sincere tip of the hat to Jack Provonsha, Graham Maxwell and Ivan Blazen. They each appreciated the ethical reversal that Jesus articulated in the sermon on the mount when He asserted that men of old have said, "an eye for an eye

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and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you . . .”—an ethic reinforced in His portrayal of God through the prodigal son story. The Loma Linda thinkers point out that 2000 years later the view of salvation articulated by the overwhelming majority of Christian teachers is based on precisely the view of justice that Jesus rejected.

The Loma Linda theology was an attempt to square the ethics of Jesus (and the nature of the prodigal son’s father) with the answer to the question, “Why did Jesus have to die.” And if Provonsha and Maxwell have laid the philosophical foundation and erected the theological framework, Ivan Blazen certainly placed and tiled the roof with his exegesis of Romans 3.

Unfortunately, as superior as it is than what it replaces, this reconstruction of Christian soteriology sits vulnerably on the sandy notion of a judgment that assumes the free will of the judged. And the parable of the wise man and the foolish man reinforces every real estate agents creed: location, location, location.

7. Rick Rice’s *Openness of God*

In the late seventies, Richard Rice, then recently graduated from a University of Chicago doctoral program, wrote a book called the *Openness of God*. Published in 1980, it was a nicely written attempt to solve a non-problem. But the publication stirred up quite a few Adventists (which was fun) causing them to cogitate (even better) about the issue of free will, choice and determinism. Rice’s thesis seemed to be that since humans have free will, God had to choose not to know our futures, because, in Rice’s view, for Him to know was for us to be determined. It seemed as if the young theologian had read the Bible to say, He thought and it happened; He thought again, and it stood fast.”

Rice’s thesis brings to mind Arthur Peacocke’s more recently developed concept of God’s “self-limited omniscience” (See *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming-Natural, Divine and Human*). In a nutshell, Peacocke believes that God

has chosen to create a universe in which His own knowledge is limited by the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The propositions that God can know the future but chooses not to know it (Rick Rice), or that God chose to create a universe that by its very nature is unpredictable (Arthur Peacocke) represent significant conceptual differences toward solving the same non-problem.

8. The dangers of letting great men settle our thinking

Many of us by our very natures (I have been slow to learn) find it difficult to really critically analyze the pronouncements of our great men—be it a Jack Provonsha or a Rick Rice locally or, from the wider community, a C.S. Lewis or a Carl Sagan. But we need to beware of gurus (be they philosophers, scientist, theologians) however well intentioned. Two examples of badly mistaken authority figures:

Carl Sagan, the late popularizer of science and darling of the media, provided a stunning case. In 1990 he predicted everywhere on the talking-head television programs, during the run-up to the first Gulf War, that if the United States went into Kuwait, Sadam Hussein would set fire to the Kingdom’s several hundred oil wells. This he warned would result in the equivalent of a nuclear winter, that it would be tantamount to several large volcanoes erupting and that the sun would be screened sufficiently to send the world into a new ice age. We did; Sadam did; and here we are, putative global warming and all of Carl Sagan’s jeremiads notwithstanding. (Could it have been Sagan’s political agenda that blinded him to what any good high school science student could have figured out?)

Or take **C.S. Lewis**, one of my favorite authors. His famous rhetorical syllogism—that because Jesus claimed to be God he had to be either a devil, a madman or the person he claimed to be—is based on at least one questionable premise: that the New Testament writers or early Church fathers did not put any words into Jesus’ mouth. Nevertheless, Lewis’

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adamantine declaration has been made to nodding heads all over the western world for forty years, including numerous times from more than one pastor at the comparatively sophisticated pulpits of both the Loma Linda and La Sierra University Churches. I'm not saying that Lewis is wrong about Jesus, just that his memorable syllogism is not quite the irrefutable argument that it is presumed to be.

9. Defining terms

How many of you came here today of your own volition?

So did I.

That should help settle a point at the outset: I believe in volition or will—and choice; I just don't believe that either is “free.” Unless someone else is forcing you, or pulling your strings, I believe that each of us regularly deliberate and act of our own volition.

It is what we mean by “free” (and how we came to be the who we are that acts) that the question of free choice and free will is really about.

If will or volition and choice mean the same thing as free will or free choice, then the modifier “free” is redundant, unnecessary and superfluous. We are basically stuttering when we put the two words together.

Now it would be reckless for me to proceed without defining a couple of terms that are very useful in discussing the free will question.

10. Agency

Agency is the capacity most (but not all) people have to account for themselves. It is what makes legal standing possible. Agency requires some self-consciousness, a modicum of language and some ability to communicate.

Agency means that I can enter into contracts and have the right to order an adult beverage.

Dogs have neither agency nor free will; but Disney tells us that—rather than being made as though they never were—they all go to heaven. And

there are some unusually sensitive people, mostly found around our better universities, who believe that if dolphins could articulate their “deep” thoughts (or if we could only break the code of their language), or if they only had digits with which to type—or even sign—that not only would we discover that they have agency, but world peace could break out. In the meantime, some of these same people are lobbying government to require the courts to award animals agency by accepting these same people as the animals' putative proxies. As if lawyers didn't already have enough business.

Dogs, cats and other animals make choices, but I concur with the general consensus that the lower forms choose unselfconsciously and with minimal consideration for the higher good.

11. Self consciousness

To have agency, it is necessary to be not only conscious, but self conscious or self aware. There is much discussion in the scientific literature about what consciousness and self-consciousness are and how they came about. The most generally accepted (and not all that helpful) notion seems to be that when the primate cerebral cortex achieved a sufficiently large number (or critical mass) of brain cells, and enough neuronal connections among those cells, consciousness appeared.

“Consciousness is the massive coupled aggregates of such participating [neuronal] circuits,” wrote Edmund O. Wilson, Harvard biologist and two-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, as if he had explained something.

“I *link*, therefore I am,” half joked biologist S. J. Singer.

Well if consciousness is a mere matter of links among a sufficiently large number of information processing nodes, we may expect the worldwide web to become self-conscious any day now. And given its most common “thoughts,” the very next thing it ought to do, I think you would all agree, is blush.

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12. Contingency (and the luck of your birth)

The word “contingent” or “contingency” is the real lynchpin to the entire puzzle regarding free will. The word and its variations have common usage. We may speak of alternative plans as contingencies. We may advise our progeny that going to a movie with friends tomorrow afternoon will be contingent upon having their homework done. Permission to attend the movie with friends is linked or connected by the parents with the completion of homework.

Philosophers frequently use the term in a similar way to address the hurdle for free will raised by the fact of human contingency. They are referring to the constant and unavoidable connection we have with our environment. The word derives from the French, *contingere*: meaning to touch on all sides. It is a condition absolutely necessary for reliable cause and effect.

Let me illustrate just how exacting, ubiquitous, and unforgiving contingency really is. To help illustrate just how small, incidental or mundane an event *can* unalterably affect the entire cascade of events that follow, conceive for a moment of the moment when you were conceived. The young people who were to become your parents were sharing an intimate moment: a small particle of dust, a sneeze . . . and no you. Or a car backfires at just the wrong moment. Whoops, no Pastor McRary.

Small matters; huge outcomes—at least a prospective somebody whose acquaintance we will never make. So little things can mean a lot. But my laborious point is that as far as who we are and who we are continually becoming is concerned, every event—regardless of size—has its inescapable, determinative impact, precisely because of the contingency (the touching on all sides) that is required for a semi-negotiable, cause-and-effect universe.

13. Freedom

Freedom has many meanings, not all of them attractive. Janice Joplin is famous for her line,

“freedom is having nothing left to lose.” I have heard any number of young people over the years scream with feeling (usually at night during spring break), “I’m free, white and twenty-one!” Most of them were so sloshed they hardly had agency, much less free will.

a. Not political

The most significant freedom issue for mankind in recorded history has been political freedom—freedom from the dominion of others; freedom, as in our Declaration of Independence, for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Of course many of today’s American politicians prefer to forget the little word “pursuit,” in “pursuit of happiness”; just as they want to forget the “created” in “all men are created equal,” not because it offends their commitment to secularity, but because it leaves room for the possibility of inequality among individuals and groups.

b. Not economic

It is natural, unfettered ongoing interactions—myriad, moment-by-moment adjustments—that make open economies relatively efficient and the envy of those who live in closed, authoritarian, planned economies. But I am not talking about political freedom in which the issue is the enhancement of options and the reduction of constraints—the sort of freedom that made the last hundred years the American Century.

c. Not from ethical duty

Freedom—or rather freedom from responsibility—has been pushed more recently into the area of morality and ethics in such a way as to cause the ground gained for individual freedom to begin to erode even before we began this new millennium. The relativization of morality has led to an attrition of freedom from fear, freedom of speech, and freedom of travel; and the growth of *group* rights has correlated (inevitably and inversely) with the unraveling of *individual* freedoms.

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d. Ontological

But the freedom we are concerned with today has to do with being, with the nature of humanity and—recalling my null hypothesis—with the illusion of individual independence, another way of saying free will.

The question of individual free will really precedes the political freedom issue, because it concerns human ontology. What kind of creature is it that continually fights (or doesn't fight) for political independence or economic dominance? And it is with that question in mind that I began to ask myself what it is that the "free" in "free will" is supposed to mean. Free from what? Free to what? Free of what? Free in what sense? What do the discussants who advocate or deny free will mean by the word "free"?

Freedom is often used as a simulacrum of *independence*. To close in on the point we must discover free of what? Independent of what? Independent to what?

To really understand independence one only needs to turn to probability statistics and the independence in sampling that valid experimental procedures must utilize to measure reliably (at a given level of confidence) the probability of specified outcomes. This is rigorous independence in which any choice has no bearing—no effect (or impact)—on the outcome of any other choice. This is a freedom with which in daily life we could not long live.

In fact, I believe it is the precise opposite of that contrived, random experimental reality that provides the cause-and-effect reality that is essential to our place in the cosmos.

14. The Theologians define freedom

By human freedom theologians often simply mean that God doesn't meddle in the human scenario, doesn't get involved in our creaturely contingency. He hides behind the veil, lest we be overwhelmed by the epiphany. Of course such a dogma creates problems for the burning bush and the Incarnation,

or any meaningful doctrine of the Holy Spirit; and, if one is logically consistent, it is pretty hard on the Second Coming. Religion teachers (and some pastors) often cite freedom and free will to explain why God appears not to meddle in human affairs. Unlike the priests of Baal, they are sophisticated (rather than masochistic) in their effort to explain why their alters are not consumed. The asserted importance of, and preservation efforts regarding, the notion of free will may be for some the desire to preserve what has become a theological "city of refuge."

One thing that many religious advocates of the words free will mean is that our decisions, our choices, are made in a way that is at once so witting, and so independent of agencies outside ourselves, that we can be damned by God to eternal hell—justly—for making choices that God does not approve. In other words the theodicy of many Christians requires free will to justify morally the judgment and the punishment that they believe will befall the wicked.

15. The SDA investment

Nowhere that I know of in the Christian world has a denomination developed so much of its theological ethos around the notion of judgment. And no denomination has an eschatology (the great controversy) so absolutely bound up in the notion or assumption of free will.

Adventism has a curious and interesting history on the point. There is the Free-will Baptist influence on the earliest Ellen Harmon writings. And there are her less than thoughtful statements about slaves and slave masters—a third-grade theodicy. And there is the Adventist doctrine of an attenuated hell, where some burn longer than others—an enormous improvement on burning in perpetuity, but still an idea that presupposes that choices, to be perfidious, must be "free."

16. Free-will Baptist roots

Adventist roots in the theology of free-will antedate even the little band of disappointed

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Millerites that formed up around Portland, Maine, in the neighborhood of McGuire Hill after Christ's failure to appear on October 22, 1844. In fact it was the visions of William Foy, a Free-will Baptist minister, that provided some of the earliest examples of Miss Harmon's tendency to requisition the ideas and words of others for publication over her own name "as precious rays of light from the throne of God." Ellen Harmon the teenager was a friend of Foy, and she sat with his wife in Beethoven Hall as he described what the Lord had shown him in vision. The Pearson brothers, sons of Ellen's spiritual godfather, published Foy's early visions well before James White went into print with Ellen's first effort.

Ellen Harmon might not have claimed the words and thoughts of others as her own; but, given her nature, and the spiritual exigency of the devastated Millerites, she would in practice do little else. As Kenny Lee Puckett would say: "What could'a happened, did."

17. Slaves and slave masters

In a segue full of coincidence and, perhaps, irony, we move forward a couple of years from William Foy, a free, black, Free-will Baptist minister, preaching to white audiences in eastern Maine, before the Millerite disappointment (and three years before the Civil War), to Ellen White's unfortunate assertion in *Spiritual Gifts*—1 (p. 193) that because God is merciful, He lets the slave "be as though he had not been." Why? Because "God cannot take the slave to heaven who has been kept in ignorance and degradation, knowing nothing of God, or the Bible . . ."

Mrs. White seemed to be saying that the slaves were not well enough informed to make "free," and therefore responsible, choices for which they could be held accountable. But if I am correct about the absence of free will among humans, none of us makes decisions for which we can be held accountable, since none of us make "free" choices. We will all have to be saved or be as though we never were.

18. A responsible ontology equals Universalism.

It is a puerile stream of theology in Adventism that springs from Ellen White's *Spiritual Gifts*—1 statements about slaves and other information-challenged individuals who in the end a merciful God will make "as though [they] had not been." This kind of "inspired" statement raises all kinds of problems not the least of which is its implications for what is a self.

Logical and ethical problems aside, Mrs. White (well into her thirties by this time) seems to be at odds with Saint Paul who spoke in Hebrews 5: 3 of a High Priest "who can have compassion on the ignorant." And what does knowledge have to do with salvation anyway? Are we Gnostics? And of course it is implied that grace is contingent on something: knowledge. But "contingent (or conditional) grace" is a no-brainer oxymoron.

Very few fans of Ellen White really have pondered her remarkable notion that a life could be made to not have been lived. (Maybe they have watched "Back to the Future" too many times.) Hers was a sophomoric effort to rescue God from an ethical dilemma of her own making, for not saving those who had lived and suffered in comparative ignorance. Ellen White assumes that the slaves do not deserve immolation, because they did not have enough information to choose freely.

19. The Murkiness Doctrine

While Ellen White's theology of the judgment may seem shortsighted, she seemed to be saying that a lack of understanding made free will or free choices unavailable—not an altogether stupid line of reasoning. However, there are many contemporary Adventists whose unthoughtfulness leads them to posit opinions the logic of which clearly imply that ignorance is a prerequisite for free choice or free will. I call that the murkiness doctrine of free will and moral judgment. According to Ellen, if we don't know enough we don't have free moral agency. But according to other Adventists these days, if we have

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more than a certain amount of understanding (too much clarity) our decision for God would be coerced or determined. The choice would be too obvious and therefore not free or valid or meaningful.

(Using similar logic, the Bible has errors and contradictions so that we *can* choose freely! Or, along the same line, if God were to be clear—or even semi-obvious—choosing to do right would lose its “merit”—a really nasty word to those who believe they live by faith or grace, but what seems to others more like credulity and compassion.)

These curious ideas about judgment and the second coming imply that at some point a universe run by murkiness and uncertainty comes to an end. Then why was it so important for a few millennia to keep us wretches in the dark while demanding (or so our religious leaders tell us) that we crawl into the face of the evidence?

Every theological trail I ever have hike down has led, as Whitaker Chambers once put it, like Russian roads into “trackless mud and swallowing distance.” And I have discovered no basis for saying, as Sisyphus did after his harrowing journey, “I know that all will be well.”

20. Investigative judgment (Great Controversy)

Ironically, Adventist eschatology insists that our role is to clarify and present a particular issue (the Gospel, the character of Christ, the third angel’s message in verity) to a dying world (and the watching universe) so clearly that it will trigger the end of the play. Simultaneously denominational apologists argue that clarity on other issues would coerce our decision-making and spoil the judgment. This is pretzellan logic—the twisted logic of the pretzel. Amazingly, amusingly, maddeningly I grew up around a denomination that teaches that the return of Christ depends on this clarification, this demonstration, while simultaneously warning me that I had better be ready because Jesus may come tomorrow and His return may catch me unawares, with some sin(s) unforgiven.

But the doctrine of investigative judgment teaches a judgment that is careful, open and fair. And it implies “free agency”—something that Kenny Lee Puckett would tell you exists only in team sports.

21. The Fall—a shared Christian problem

What is justice, or justness, in a deterministic universe? Ellen White and Joseph Smith both wrote about mankind’s “propensities.” It is obvious to me that the notion of fallen man and propensity to sin *supports* the absence-of-freedom view.

It is instructive to revisit the story of the fall with the freedom and free-will issue in mind; because Genesis three confronts us with the first recorded instance of what “could’a happened, did.”

3:1 Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

3:2 And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

3:3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

3:4 And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

3:5 For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

3:6 And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and *gave also unto her husband with her*; and he did eat.

So an innocent (presumably unprejudiced) couple confront an exotic creature in an astounding, magical garden—a garden growing fruit that vitiated senescence. According to Ellen White (by way of John Milton) the more curvaceous of the creatures—

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brought into existence on the sixth day, cloned and modified from Adam, innocent and naïve—made her first mistake (again according to Ellen White) by walking the garden alone. Already the environment was dangerous, inviting, mysterious, irresistible.

But why did these intelligent, supposedly perfect, pristine slates take the “wrong” turn? Is the curiosity drive more powerful than the submission-to-authority drive? And in the first couple, was those propensities learned or innate?

And then, as Milton tells us, Adam (innocent and unprogrammed) succumbs to the sin of uxoriousness (very uncommon these days)—choosing rather to suffer Eve’s fate out of bonds that had been built into Adam by his Creator.

Later on the Creator does something analogous—He participates fully in *Man’s Fate* (what Andre Malraux named is most famous book), choosing to suffer the same demise for His bride. The first sacrifice, Adam’s, is seen as the folly that led to all the misery of which we are participants; while that of the Second is understood by many to be the crowning act of love in the universe.

When Eve did whatever she did in the Garden of Eden, her nature and the environment conspired to accomplish what Jews and Christians call the Fall. Theologians tell us that the cause (or at least the opportunity) for the fall or sin was the free-will nature of humankind.

I might argue that they have it precisely wrong. The joined-at-the-rib pair did precisely what their natures and the opportunity made inevitable they would do. What could’a happened, did.

It is not only in the nature of cats to be curious. The garden was a setup, a sting operation, sort of like what happened to Job. Today the couple’s defense attorneys would get them off with an entrapment argument, and they’d skate.

The outcome was never in doubt. And don’t blame the woman. It was the brilliant, blind, sexist poet John Milton who set us on that path with his chauvinist theodicy. Ellen White grafted the point

of his poetry into her prophesying about the fall, and a defense of it wound up in the *SDA Bible Commentary’s* isegetical elaboration on Genesis 3:6.

According to the *SDA Bible Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 230, 231), after listening to the snake Eve broke four commandments in quick succession: “Having coveted that to which she had no right [tenth] . . . she stole God’s property [eighth]. . . [then] giving it to her husband she also transgressed the sixth commandment (Ex. 20:13). She then broke the first commandment (Ex. 20:3), because she placed Satan before God in her esteem.” Finally, the *Commentary* denies that Genesis 3:6 implies what it actually says: “The statement that ‘she gave also to her husband with her,’ does not imply that he had been with her all the time, standing mute at the scene of temptation.”

If Adam and Eve had been more compliant by nature (what Myers-Briggs calls “Sensing/ Judging,” and what Keith Golay calls a “bear” temperament type), the outcome would have been different and this topic would interest no one.

Those who believe that free will resulted from the fall (and the resulting knowledge of good and evil) face a delicious dilemma: either they are wrong, or Eve’s choice to eat of the fruit was determined. Because she made the wrong decision before the fall, *before* she acquired the knowledge of good and evil.

And do we really want to say that freedom and dignity only came into existence with the fall? And, by inference conclude that both will disappear when all things are made new?

A simpler explanation for the fall—one I like, and one that Kenny Lee Puckett might appreciate—is that one dewy morning long ago, at the sunrise of all time, God shanked a two-iron off of the practice tee, and this little sphere wound up in the rough.

Can I get an, “Amen”?

22. That which I would not, I do

In Romans 7, the “wretched man,” apostle, “the evil-that-I-would-not, that-I-do” Paul, seems to be using free will to wrestle with his nature or with the

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competing arms of contingency that comprise his evolving nature. On the road to Damascus Paul's contingency included a powerful experience that reoriented his thinking, but not his nature. Ultimately, we each always make our choices out of who we are. An example from my own experience might be entertaining if not illuminating.

Given my nature, it is almost fun to find more or less polite ways to give really obnoxious people the universal salute. Back in 1968 at Pacific Union College late one afternoon on the stage of an empty Irwin Hall, a couple of black friends of mine and I took a break from the serious business of education to have a moment's fun. Richard Goodlett sat at the big concert grand and began playing the rhythm-and-blues tune made famous by Ray Charles, "What'd I Say." Herbie Powell, the Student Association vice president, joined him, drumming on a bare metal folding chair. Soon—and in an inadvertent stab against stereotype—the one white man among us began to sort of sing, doing his best Ray "you got the right one baby" Charles imitation: "See the girl with the red dress on? She can do the dog all night long, alright, hey, hey, alright now; tell me whay'd I say." (It is astonishing how moronic song lyrics can sound *sans* music.) "See the girl with the diamond ring? She knows how to shake that thing, alright."

In the middle of our soulful abandon, the chairman of the religion department, Leslie Hardinge, materialized and performed his best Jesus-cleansing-the-temple-of-the-money-changers imitation. And of course, what could'a happened next, did.

Nineteen years later, PUC again, the summer of '86. Ellen G. White Estate representatives Robert Olson, Roger Coon and Paul Gordon were presenting a ten-day summer workshop for Church workers, ostensibly for the purpose of tackling the tough issues that had been raised in the early eighties about Ellen White's prophetic integrity. As editor of *Adventist Currents*, I attended the workshop with my Kaypro luggable computer (eight-inch floppy drives) and lived for a few days once again in Newton Hall.

To understand how I was feeling in the campus cafeteria by breakfast time on the final morning, it is necessary to know that the three wise men from the White Estate had spent each day reading to us, hour after hour, from articles that they handed out at the beginning of each session—articles that had already appeared, most of them, in the *Adventist Review* or *Ministry* magazine. This seemed calculated to leave as little time as possible for questions or discussion at the end of each presentation.

On the final morning of the workshop, in the wake of that frustration, I approached a cafeteria breakfast table at which were seated half a dozen of the ministers attending the workshop with whom I had struck up an acquaintance. And it happened that seated at breakfast among these his former students was the semi-retired Leslie Hardinge who had audited the workshop. As I stood exchanging pleasantries with a couple of the young clerics, Hardinge looked up and addressed me asking—after ten days of helpful information from the White Estate itself—what I thought now.

You know how in just a split second many thoughts can flash through your mind? Well, I remembered being chased from the stage twenty years earlier. And I remembered reading Ray Cottrell's shorthand notes (taken during the sectarian lynching of Desmond Ford at Glacier View Ranch in 1980) that quoted Hardinge, in plenary session, warning the assembly to "beware of historians." And I considered the implication of the way Hardinge asked me the question that he thought I should be satisfied now, given all the devastating Ellen White apologetics we'd been privileged to hear for the past ten days.

I might have said, "Elder Hardinge, I remain unconvinced by what I've heard." Or, "Dr. Hardinge, there wasn't much (meaning anything) new in these presentations to help me with the profound questions that Ellen White scholarship has raised." Or even, "Dr. Hardinge, don't you have trouble believing that it was God that raise up and maintain a prophet who would misrepresent (across a seventy-year ministry)

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the very nature of the work she claimed God gave her to do?”

Given our history, my nature and the audience of several ministers waiting to hear my response, I thought about those more benign and respectful options.

You may recall that we have been told that when we are called to answer for our positions—even before kings and potentates—just when we need it, a fit word will be supplied?

It’s true.

As Elder Hardinge and his breakfasting associates awaited my reply, there flashed through my mind a moment on the Merv Griffin Show years earlier and a remark by one of his guests, Robert Blake, the diminutive, muscular star of *Beretta* (who subsequently got himself into so much trouble).

“Elder Harding,” I answered, “I feel very much like the jackrabbit making love to the skunk: I haven’t had enough, but I’ve had all I can stand.”

What could’a happened, did.

Had I debated with myself for that moment before responding to Hardinge, and decided to overrule my nature, my propensity (what some might call temptation), I would not have been overruling my nature; it would have been my nature to overrule that particular temptation under those particular circumstances.

Likewise with St. Paul: when he says “that which I would, I do not; and that which I would not, I do,” we are reading the dictation of a man wrestling consciously with conflicting contingencies that intersect in his psyche; and whichever he does or he doesn’t, it is him that does or doesn’t. How Paul behaved—whether he did or he didn’t—was determined by the interaction between his context (however close or far flung) and who he was. There is nothing else that decided his behavior.

On one view of determinism, I have no reason to be either proud or ashamed of that little moment at PUC. But I do not extrapolate from my confidence

in the absence of free will an absence of right and wrong, better or worse.

Those of us who, as the result of nature and nurture, are so inclined, will, to the possible good of those around us, remind others for whom we are part of the external influences, of the consequences of particular choices. We can be meaningful, effective parts of their contingency.

It is consequently my nature to adjure you to vote in elections, to labor with the misguided and to lift up the fallen in this or any acceptable year of our Lord.

23. Chance and Randomness

A number of authors, including Arthur Peacocke—and, perhaps, some of you—have tried to enlist the notion of randomness (or the indeterminacy of quantum physics) as sort of a philosophical Maginot Line, in the effort to preserve the chimera of free will or free choice. But before we close on that final argument, I want to differentiate between the terms “chance” and “randomness” or “indeterminacy.”

Chance / Blackjack

Chance, I propose, is a mere perspectival artifact—a byproduct of our cognitive limitation. It is human ignorance that makes chance an experiential reality, which ignorance, in turn, helps to make choices appear or feel “free,” or independent—as if they were made only by us or by the independent observer in us who sometimes monitors our behavior . . . except when we are too agitated. Both the out-of-control us, and the more considered, self-monitoring us, are determined by our nature and our nurture, as is the tendency for us to operate in one mode or the other.

In the game of blackjack (or 21), the rules of the game and the rules of the “house”—combined with the absence of photographic memory in most players—put the odds of winning any given hand in favor of the casino. Precisely *because* of human memory limitations, blackjack *is* a game

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of chance. But about forty years ago, an ingenious mathematician, Edward O. Thorp, used an early computer to calculate the best possible strategy of play for every possible combination of two cards initially dealt a player and the two cards (including one face up) that the dealer draws for himself on each round or hand.

If, in anticipation of playing blackjack at a casino, an individual memorizes cold (like multiplication tables) the computer-calculated best strategy for every possible combination of two player cards and dealer up card, as I once did, and then (using a running plus/minus count of the cards as they are picked up by the dealer after each hand) carefully tracks the ratio of ten to non-ten value cards that have been played, she can reduce greatly the “chance” element in the game.

The player who counts cards in this manner acquires an advantage over the house; because she can ascertain, on the game’s journey through a deck (or decks) of cards, those occasions when the remainder of the deck is disproportionately concentrated with ten value cards (tens and face cards). She then increases her bets and adjusts her play on the knowledge that the dealer—who has to draw cards until he has a hand of no less than seventeen (but no greater than twenty-one)—is more likely to go over twenty-one and lose the hand.

Counting cards in Blackjack provides a concrete example of how, in a specific instance, an increase in knowledge creates a reduction in chance. I’m hoping that you will extrapolate from this green felt tables example to the realization that chance in general is merely an artifact or byproduct of human ignorance. The only reason that I would not say that there is an inverse relationship between information and chance is because chance, as I have explained it (in spite of the fact that you can quantify it), has no ontological property. It is not a thing. It is a construct.

If we could, per impossible, know all the particulars that impinge on every momentary event intersect . . . the experience of chance would disappear, and along with it the illusion of free choice.

This same limitation of human perception and memory explains the effectiveness of the variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement (Skinner again)—the most powerful of behavioral reinforcers. It explains the genesis and maintenance of superstitions (most religion), the allure of the financial markets and the popularity of lotteries and all games of chance. However, the biggest joke of all that is played on humans by their ignorance is the perception that they have free will, that they have autonomy, that they make independent choices, that they are gods—small “g.”

Randomness

In its common use among statisticians, random simply means that objects or events are not arranged in any identifiable pattern—that there is no system or organization to an array of objects or a sequence of events. There is indeed an analogy between randomness and the indeterminacy of subatomic particles.

Indeterminacy

Since the 1920s some physicists have been trying to convince themselves (and others) that quantum indeterminacy can in some way explain free will. Picking up on this idea, Arthur Peacocke argues that God—in creating a quantum universe—voluntarily limited his omniscience and created the possibility of free will “by the very open-endedness that he has bestowed upon creation.” God has chosen to make a world, Peacocke explains, in which some future states, for instance the precise time when a radium nucleus will decay, are unknowable even by an “omniscient” being. And Peacocke redefines omniscience to mean the “knowledge of all things that are *possible* to know,” rather than the “knowledge of all things that could *conceivably* be known.”

But whether God (like Bill Gates) sees the road ahead and chooses not to meddle, or God creates a universe in which the road ahead is not open to view, in either case the road will unfold however it will. Or

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as, Kenny Lee might put it (and Doris Day actually did) “que sera, sera”—whatever will be, will be.

A natural consequence of Peacocke’s premise is his view that the future has “no ontological status,” that is, it “does not exist in any sense” (until it arrives at which point it is for no really measurable moment the present); consequently, there is no content of “future events” for even God to know. (But the logic of Peacocke’s deconstructionist precluding of the future is equally applicable to the present and the past. He may as well deny the existence of time . . . or even existence itself.)

This brings up a point that I have pondered: Is there a potentially consequential difference between *knowing* the future and being able to *perfectly predict* it? Maybe God can put the universe on his four-or-more-dimensional spreadsheet and project all outcomes perfectly. This might not satisfy a rigorous application of the word “know,” but the ability to perfectly predict, it seems to me, would create, at least for Rice and Peacocke, the same freedom-robbing problem that the idea of absolutely *knowing* the future does.

On Peacocke’s view, God could know the probability of finding an electron at a given distance from the nucleus of a helium atom, but neither God nor we could know simultaneously, with unlimited precision, both the position and momentum of that electron.

But the indeterminacy (and consequent unpredictability) of reality at the quantum level, I would argue, has no bearing whatsoever on the free will issue. Because what happens at the quantum level does nothing to distinguish or differentiate among the kinds of choices that matter to us—or even affect us—at the level on which we live our lives.

As we think our way down from the macro to the micro—mountains, boulders, sand, molecules, atoms—we might ask ourselves, as Daniel Dennett does, “How can random resolutions of quantum-level events provide people with any control over their behavior?”

The subatomic realm provides the undergirding for a reality in which biochemistry can take place. But the quantum reality is analogous to the sand and gravel in a concrete highway. Both the sand and concrete (all comprised of atoms and their unpredictable sub-particles) are necessary to support vehicles. But the sand and concrete (and the subatomic particles they are made of) are all helpless to determine whether they will make up a driveway or a freeway, or to influence where the roads lead, or which one we will take. Those are actions taken by contingent minds irrespective of the momentary position of any given subatomic particle.

But since we are actually completely contingent creatures, and since there is no free will or free choice for Rice or Peacocke to be concerned about, all their effort and fun (and some royalties) is the result of a major misunderstanding . . . that they could not help having, and, consequently, is nothing for us to laugh about. Although it may be our natures to snicker anyway.

But play pretend

Let’s try to imagine how indeterminacy might contribute to the possibility of free will, if it were to invade the level of being at which we actually do business? It might provide a clutch, some slippage, like a patch of black ice or a Teflon bar, between the individual and the rest of reality that would temporarily disengage the cause-and-effect gears of our contingency.

But such slippage would simultaneously subtract from the rationality, the reasonableness and reliability and meaningfulness of our existence. What would result might look like slapstick comedy to an outside observer, but for the participants it would be a rather short-lived nightmare. Imagine freeways without lanes. Imagine ladders with practical jokers for rungs. Imagine showers with variable-ratio scheduled hot/cold water dispensation. Imagine a major air terminal without air traffic controllers. Imagine paychecks decided by a table of random numbers. Imagine utility bills

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Randomness in the decision-making process can only subtract from the independence and dignity of a choice. Why? *because it takes even the illusion of decision making out of the hands of the individual.* And while indeterminacy *could not* create the circumstance necessary for free will, it *would create* chaos.

There is no clutch, no slippage, no black ice, no play, no consequence-free zone, between the individual and the universe she inhabits. And it is only at those junctures where she has made messes that she would have it otherwise.

It is the fact that every thought or act has consequences (large or small, sooner or later) that make us consequential, that make our existence wonderful and awful in turns, and just predictable enough to keep us coming back for more.

With humans, and their imaginations and ability to project, to play “what if,” even the “future” becomes a part of the environment and one of the determinative factors of our nature. (I believe that regardless of what time turns out to be, that events occur sequentially; so that even if the future can be projected perfectly by Someone with limitless Random Access Memory, that does not mean that the future exists, or is there to be known, until it occurs. This is one of several distinctions that I believe makes *The Openness of God* unnecessary.)

The cascade of events that bear directly and indirectly on an individual, from genes to weather to upbringing to the time of day, determine who an individual is and what that individual does momentarily. But, like the economy or the weather, the amount of data is too great for observing humans to predict absolutely, or even reliably, what a given individual will do under any given circumstance.

We are in a great, living, pulsing kaleidoscope. We inhabit a massive game of Chinese pickup sticks. We are cells in an incalculably large, multi-dimensional spreadsheet. Change one number and all other numbers change. Contingency rules! Now there's a bumper sticker. **Contingency Rules!**

Remember chance is only “chance” from our limited perspective. To Someone with limitless RAM, and Someone for whom our time is almost like freeze frame, the ultimate resting place of a rolling die on a craps table is even more precisely predictable than the landing place of a fly ball to an experienced outfielder.

I propose that at the beginning of our time—to desert the links momentarily for the green felt tables—God took an overlarge pool stick and “broke” the triangle of round, racked singularities. With that “big bang” He initiated our universe and our contingency and maybe much more.

Nobody is pulling our strings or has decided from all eternity that (or what) each of us was going to be. But so long as cause and effect are in effect, we have that contingency, that touching on all sides, that (once the cue first struck) simultaneously made possible (even as it determined) everything that followed. And all that could happen began to happen and continues to happen.

If, on the other hand, there are breaks in the causal chain, we have chaos—we have an *ad hoc* demolition derby, a great, continual running of the bulls, and certainly no dignity when a swallow results in a drool, when your mouse does not move the cursor or when a kick of the left rudder pedal deploys the landing gear.

Only a God who can be outside our contingency and enter and leave at His whim can have what many of us seem to want. And that was the first sin—the desire to be as Gods. It is a mistake that has never left us. We aren't satisfied with the military slogan, “Be all that you can be.” The narcissist in each of us wants—without even trying—to be more than we can be.

It is better for us, at least in this life, to accept our place as stockbrokers, teachers, golfers, dentists, physician or even philosophers. Because on the no-free-will-view there is no basis for pride or arrogance. I can rest now—satisfied but not smug—that I have been this afternoon part of your contingency. And I should thank you for your polite company, but I

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owe that less to your free will than to the Great Pool Player and the billions of years of contingency that has brought us to this particular moment.

Anyway, it remains difficult to answer the old question whether it is better to be a pig satisfied or Socrates dissatisfied. But since the decision has been made for me, I think I'll just head for the driving range and see what contingency has decided about my three-wood.

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