

WELCOME TO THE DIMFORMATION AGE!

notes from the desk of Ned Mudd
reporting from the crawlspace of history

"All I know is that I know nothing; and I'm not sure about that."

----Michel Eyguem de Montaigne



In the spirit of Seigneur Montaigne, perhaps Europe's most alluring philosopher, this essay (essai - to be precise) aims at nothing in particular, and everything in general. After all, where is there to go that hasn't already been reached a thousand times before? So let me state at the outset - "I am here going to whip up a hodgepodge of various items." So be it, Monsieur Montaigne.

And, if I'm already beginning to sound (can fonts sound?) a tad insubstantial, née esoteric, don't stress about it. Language is inherently abstract, and I plan to make sure it remains that way as long as possible. The human experience may be devolving into a

foamy sea of data-bits, but that's no excuse for what is currently passing itself off as pop culture. Buttermilk is cultured; it's hard to say the same thing about The Billboard Top 40.

Does anybody remember Scampy the Clown? A seemingly innocuous question, but of great interest to a smattering of TV cognoscenti. Seeing as it's my essay, let me be bold enough to say this: If you can see into the true nature of Scampy and his merry band of syndicated co-stars, your deep-grok of the American super circus will be more or less complete. It all begins (and ends) with a word from our sponsors.

Which is not to say that enlightenment is pleasant. Although it's always nice to get a laugh along the Way. Clowns may seem silly to our cyber-sophisticated sensibilities today, but at one point during our long slog down the bunny trail they served a vital socio-spiritual function. Somebody has to be the keeper of the keys to our cavernous subconscious minds, especially during the dark night of the soul. Why not the village clown?

If at this point you're starting to harbor vague feelings of linear distortion, not to worry. The idea that words on a page (even a digital page) must make sense is simply an example of consensual fraud. By that I mean we've collectively been duped by our own neurons into believing in the sanctity of certain socially acceptable algorithms involving the written word. Where these algorithms came from is anybody's guess. Perhaps glossolalia only goes so far in the lofty pursuit of civilization. On the other hand, civilization only goes so far itself. And then what?

But why digress? Like any other intrepid cyber-surfer, you, too, can find Scampy and company on lovely YouTube at a moment's notice. If talking birds and high-flying Hungarian acrobats don't jiggle your synapses, perhaps your therapist needs replacing. Of course, as with any other endeavor in today's hyper-banal flotsam culture, whether you comprehend the experience depends on your proclivity regarding the penultimate question: the red pill or the blue pill? As always, the decision is yours.

Or is it? According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, free will "is a philosophical term of art for a particular sort of capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives." So far, so good. The tunnel of conundrums appears when we begin a query as to what, exactly, a rational agent might be. Aren't we all rational agents simply by virtue of belonging to the species *Homo erectus asphaltus*? A cursory review of today's headlines belies the sanity of such nonsense.

A better question might be this: Who cares if free will is a part of the Universe's infinite fabric (assuming the word infinite has any meaning outside of old Carl Sagan reruns)? If everything that happens is merely a dazzlingly convoluted chain of dependent causation (karma soufflé), do we get a free pass on this year's taxes? If you answered something along the lines of "no," you're batting 1099. Even David Bois, Esq., would have a hard time keeping a straight face arguing that case.

Of course, the quandary over free will is one of those sticky wickets best left in the hands of corduroy philosophers and other assorted Ivy League wiz-



ards. To be, or not to be, remains the big question, despite the blunt end of the Cold War and its dark cloud of Apocalyptic Doom. If a global nuclear winter is preordained, what use is a bomb shelter? Or a fat 401(k), for that matter? The answer is obvious, isn't it?

Whether to order thick crust or whole wheat pizza simply doesn't seem that interesting twelve hours later, when most of last night's meal is on its way towards being compost. Or, in the words of my favorite poetic cosmonaut, Tao Jones: "In the final analysis, there is no final analysis." Let's continue.....

According to my editor's stern marching orders, I am now halfway through this drivel of an essay. Montaigne I am not. But then, neither was he on more than one occasion. For to truly be one's self is often simply a matter of timing and circumstance. For instance: are you yourself in the depths of a deep sleep? When you wake from said sleep, are you the same self as you were while dreaming of winning the Powerball lottery? Is there anything reliable that we can call a self without falling into a rhetorical pit of nauseous quicksand?

Of course, those trick questions deserve trick answers. And to find those answers, let's turn to one of my favorite Zen masters, Thich Nhat Hanh (the man who once said, "To return to a speck of dust will be quite an exciting adventure!")

Where was I? In Zen parlance, I am here; where else is there to be? Of course, as with enlightenment, being here isn't necessarily a pleasant experience. Meanwhile, there's that pesky self to deal with. Master Hanh has this to say about that - "Our mind is like a television set with thousands of channels, and the channel we switch on is the channel we are at the moment." If that doesn't make sense, keep reading. It'll probably get worse.

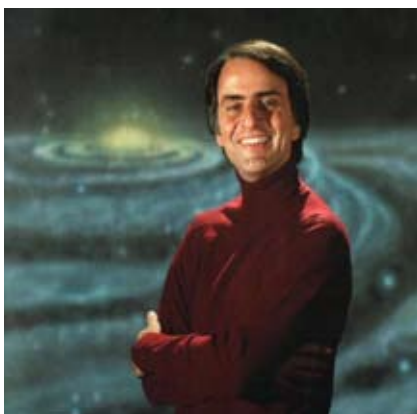
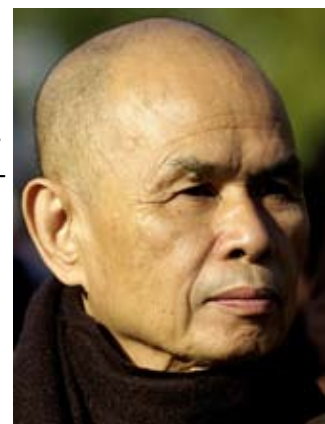
How about this for a taste of quantum fun: the mind is not local. As Schrödinger's cat made clear (relatively speaking), scientific experiments are influenced by being observed. Or - an observer is, in some inexplicable manner, part of the observed. Which calls into question the concept of a unique and permanent self, existing like a vaporous cloud of consciousness floating inside one's bulbous skull.

Let's jump back to Thich Nhat Hanh, who says, "Not only is the mind not localized, but everything is like this..... The notion of outside and inside cannot be applied to reality." Turn the channel and you are a new you. Which leads us right back to where we started, metaphorically speaking: free will or deterministic universe?

I'd like to leave it right there, dangling in the limbo we all inhabit as our birthright. But why not thicken the quantum soup a tad, at least until the rat is in the proverbial trap and we can get back to the fantasy we call our daily lives. Which leads us into a wonderful morass of philosophical mumbo jumbo from ground zero: ancient Greece.

From what I've managed to gather in my pursuit of all things relevant and pithy, the atavistic Greek philosophers were, in today's goofy parlance, mash-up artists. Not that the Greeks invented such erudite pastiche. On the contrary, folks have always had a habit of copying and pasting fragments of gnostic "wisdom" into the worldview de jour. For example, the World Tree, our lovely little planet's axis mundi, has been cloned by transient ideologues so many times that smart folks have simply quit fretting about its proverbial roots. And how many of Edith Hamilton's colorful tales can seriously claim their origins as Mycenaean? Even Genesis begins looking a bit second hand if one has the time to peek under the lingua franca.

From Heraclitus to Epicurus to Democritus to Pyrrho, even the old heart-



throb Sappho, the best of the classical Greek philosophers had a penchant for pragmatism coupled with an earthy gusto. While their philosophical cousins to the east (Persia, Bactria, India) were reveling under the influence of turbulent sky gods, the Greek pragmatists found a way to keep the dirt in their sandals, so to speak. And let's face it: dirt is fun.

How's this for pragmatic: "Raising children is an uncertain thing; success is reached only after a life of battle and worry." For that, you can thank Democritus, the man who introduced us to particle physics back in the 4th Century B.C. (before cheeseburgers). He also told us this: "Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion." I don't know about you, but that sort of brings the 2012 presidential election into better focus.

Let's not forget the sagely wisdom gushing from Heraclitus: "Couples are wholes and not wholes, what agrees disagrees, the concordant is discordant. From all things one and from one all things." Remind you of the Three Musketeers? If you said "yes," consider a tall glass of Jack Daniels.

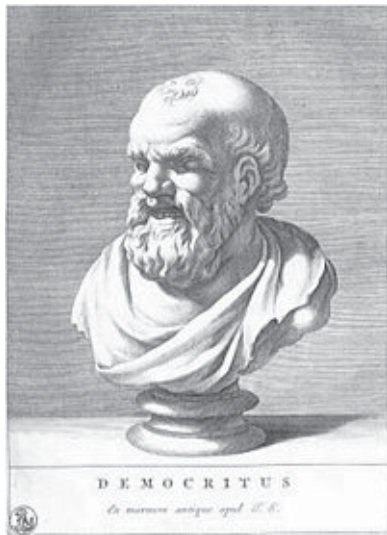
I could go on. But why? Life is plenty crazy enough without me having to spoon feed a load of baloney into the black hole that is the center of our galaxy. And if the Universe is constantly expanding, what, exactly, do we think is going to happen to that swirling gravitational vacuum cleaner when things get stretched past the loving hug of gravity? Only Facebook knows.....

salut!

Mudd

p.s. For additional reading, see Sarah Bakewell dazzling tome, "How to Live: Or a Life of Montaigne." While you're at it, digest Stephen Greenblatt's: "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern." And don't forget Heraclitus' "Fragments".

<http://www.sarahbakewell.com/Montaigne.html>



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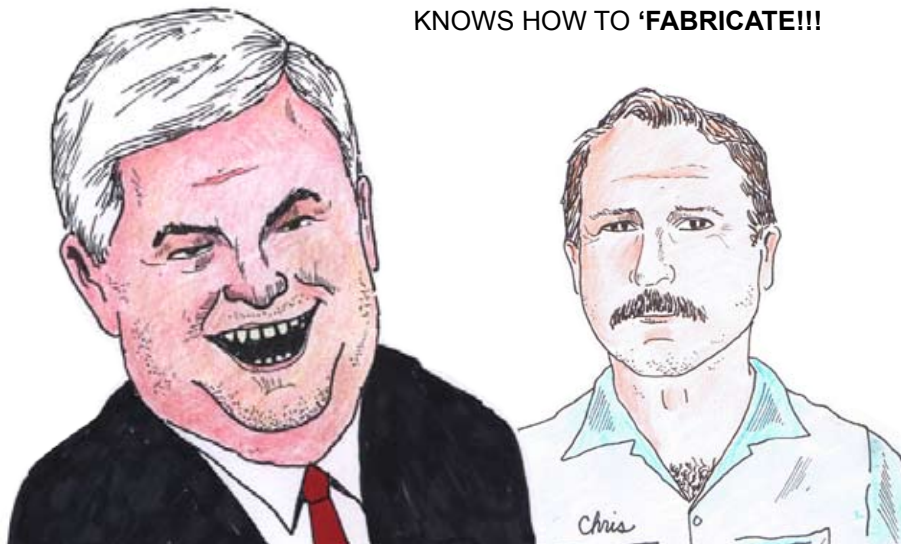
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