Love and Choice: Reflections and a Memoir

by **Samuel Hux** (July 2020)

Pacific Coast Highway (detail), R. B. Kitaj, 1973

I have written on the topic of Free Will versus Determinism before, including touching on it in these "pages" ("People Do Not *Have* Ideas, They *Choose* Them," *NER*, September 2015), which I mention only because I may indeed pilfer from that essay. But I have never written on its connection to Love, either fully or with a touch—although I'm no stranger to that marriage of ecstasy and agony. This is no promise to deliver the goods on that congeries of emotions, and I may even end up

using (abusing?) the fact of love as a way of arguing that the freedom of the will is a fact. But as these are reflections only I can't be sure where *I'll* end up. But first, some general reflections, not all of them pilfered.

The doctrine of determinism is embraced by the occasional philosopher, but more often by the philosophically careless scientist and even oftener by the garden-variety social scientist. But my experience, which I doubt is singular, is that if you discuss the hoary question of free will or determinism in a college course, or a section of the semester, on ethics, as practically every professor of philosophy will have to, you'll feel quite foolish talking about ways of discovering and judging proper ethical behavior if you don't believe it exists in the realm of *accountability* and assume instead that ethics (or "moral science" as some prefer) is about what people couldn't help doing in the first place. ("Couldn't help doing" is something I'll return to much later.)

Most philosophers from Plato and Aristotle on have assumed the truth of moral accountability—even when they come close to assuming us fate's playthings, as Saint Augustine for one does, but not close enough. But my favorite champions of free will, because I think they grasp it best, are William James in "The Dilemma of Determinism" and Charles Sanders Peirce in "The Doctrine of Necessity Examined": two essays by Americans, hurrah for the land of liberty!

The philosopher most coherent in support of the opposite view was the 18th-century Franco-German Paul-Henri Thiry, better known as Baron d'Holbach, author of *The System of Nature.* "Man's life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the face of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant . . . He is good or bad, happy or miserable, wise or foolish, reasonable or irrational, without his will being for anything in these various states." Coherent and consistent, but thoughtless! I

now pilfer my imaginary conversation with d'Holbach. "Tell me, Baron, did the immutable laws of nature necessitate your penning those two sentences of yours I have quoted? Did those laws necessitate my quoting them?

Many (most?) determinists who don't want to sound as thoughtless as the radical champ d'Holbach resort to a fictional distinction between "soft" and "hard" determinism. The hard is appropriate and true (we assume) in the realm of natural science: the falling apple does not depend upon my choice, as gravity will determine things quite sufficiently. The only co-operation between my will and gravity is—for instance—when I decide to jump off a building. The "soft" determinism intellectually adored by the occasional doltish philosopher, the occasional careless scientist, and the garden-variety social scientist depends upon a quite senseless confusion between, or illogical identification of, "Such-and-Such *caused by* This-or-That" on the one hand, and on the other "Such-and-Such *influenced by* or *limited by* This-or-That." If I say, for instance, "Circumstances determine or dictate what choices I make," all that means is that "Circumstances limit the choices available to me," and no free-willist, so to speak, denies that, unless he or she is absolutely insane of a hopeless idiot. To sum up quickly and economically: Determinism outside the realm of natural science, determinism in the moral universe, so to speak, is an intellectual embarrassment. End of "general reflections."

If the last few paragraphs interest the reader, I guess I might modestly recommend he or she take a look at a much fuller discussion in the September 2015 *NER* essay I modestly did not recommend earlier—the last half, which is to say the last fifteen paragraphs, which are the best directions I can give since we don't have page numbers in *NER*. If that is tantamount to saying you'd probably have to start at the beginning, then that's something I could not help saying. Oops.

But what if you say—or let me get personal—what if *I* say, "I fell in love [even against my better judgment if that was the case, or even if not] and I *could not help it*"? I personalize things because I claim a kind of expertise, that of conscious experience. Setting aside parental and familial love, both as receiver and giver of, I have fallen in love twice. Once, sadly with an ending. Once, for good.

The story of my "first love" involves a non-local business associate of my father reporting on a pretty young girl, his neighbor, he wished I could meet; hitch-hiking across four state lines to meet the offspring of a Greek immigrant father and a lovely hillbilly mother, after a brief correspondence, this while still in high school; then distance and silence; a year of college before enlisting in the army, and writing letters to a "girlfriend" as soldier boys will do; driving a round trip of 1076 miles during one weekend, narrowly avoiding being AWOL; then distance and silence; unexpectedly running across her at university a couple of years later; courtship and marriage; parenthood; separation; divorce. More details? Mind your own business. Suffice it to say the failure of the marriage was clearly primarily my fault, certainly not hers—a kind and responsible and thoroughly worthy human being. I am not being gentlemanly, gallant; I write during a pandemic, and somehow I am afraid to lie. I was an ass. Guilt is a subject I might explore in another essay; I have a doctorate in guilt.

If the story outlined above—especially the pre-marital part of the relationship—has a romantic tone about it, then it does. But—and this is important—there was nothing about it, I can see this in retrospect, that essentially defied predictability: it was a consistent and natural and organic development of and out of my life. Not so, what began and developed with my "second love." But this latter observation gets me slightly ahead of myself.

Questions: When did I "fall in love" that first time?

Was the “falling” in any sense a choice? Was it something that happened beyond my control, something I could not help? The first question I cannot answer, for as my outline suggests the falling was a long process, no date, but after, so to speak, several dates. So my answers to the second and third questions will have to be a philosophical proposition not dependent upon specifically empirical memory.

As for the second, and final, I know *when* the falling occurred, and I am convinced that although the falling was beyond resistance, and so in that sense something I could not help, it was also and beyond any philosophic doubt an act of choice. Bear with me.

My memory is indelible of an evening on campus, dining in a student-faculty cafeteria, which I seldom did, when I observed a lady of roughly thirty years of age approach a table of youngish faculty, sit for five or ten minutes, and then hurry out, her arms full of books and papers. She was dark-haired, her movements the fluid and graceful rhythms of a perfect body, oh yes, her face transcendently beautiful in no standard way. A poet friend had written of her before I ever saw her and did not know when I did that it was *she,* praising “the frail asymmetry of her face.” She had a sexual aura that was—pardon the cliché—breathtaking: I know it was because I stopped breathing. If this was not the non-mythical love at first sight nothing ever was. But I have seldom—except in the face of death—felt so sad and despairing. I do not know her / I have to know her / I will never know her. (Thank god I was wrong—but I am not about to write a precis of a love novel.)

But did that falling in any way involve the will, was it a choice? In so far as love is not only a state of being but an *action* as well, yes. An action implies an act*or* (not in the theatrical sense), and an actor is not someone acted upon but someone who takes an action, and *ipso facto* makes a choice.

But beyond the etymological argument, consider this: While the magical moment I've tried to characterize, the oh-my-god instant, was clearly not chosen, it was not in itself an isolated bang separable from the emotional reaction triggered, was rather an inseparable part of the moment and meaningless otherwise, an *assent*—and if an assent is not a choice it is nothing. I propose an imperfect analogy. (All analogies are imperfect—which is not to say absurd. Here's an absurd analogy: falling in love is like an apple falling.) Suppose I'm a member of a committee, with no wish or thought to be the chairman, so I'm surprised when the other members propose by acclimation that I be appointed chair, but immediately accept. Their surprise nomination was clearly not initiated by me, but my agreement, assent, is a choice. To agree is to choose. Furthermore:

When I thought, hopelessly, back in that cafeteria, "I must know her!" I knew that in some sense my wish was "against my better judgment." And that because I knew that if my wish were requited my life would be changed in some radical way, different from the relative ease which through a combination of hard work mixed with a degree of lethargy I had achieved, even if possibly boring, and if the wish were not requited I would be miserable. Danger! And I sensed somehow, I know not how, that she herself was dangerous, perhaps a source, as I put it much earlier, of ecstasy and agony. Now. . . when you are entering a path that is even possibly "against your better judgement,"—or even endorsed by your better judgment, for that matter—you are, *ipso facto* again, taking a chance, which is to say making a choice, exercising the freedom of your will.

One more remark about the "danger" as I've put it . . . I would understand if someone objected that that "hesitation" as it were, a sense let's say of vulnerability, suggests it was not truly love that I'm speaking of, for love is not so fragile a matter, then I would object in turn that the poet Theodore Roethke knew what he was talking about when

he wrote “love is not love / until love’s vulnerable.”

And even if there was something about the falling that was, as I put it “beyond resistance,” that is no support for the notion anyone should be ashamed to hold, that falling in love itself falls conveniently into the determinist’s bag of polemical weapons. Falling in love, falling temperature, falling arches, falling snow, and falling apples have only one thing in common, a present participle.

I confessed back at the beginning that I was not sure where in these reflections I would end up. But now I have suspicions. I hope that a few more necessary biographical reflections will not test the reader’s patience. Michel de Montaigne said the purpose of philosophy was to learn how to die. Montaigne was as we know a very brilliant man, but I think that is merely clever. I think, rather, the purpose of philosophy is to learn how to live. I won’t even say, as Aristotle does, to live happily. *Happily* does not quite characterize an experience involving agony as well as ecstasy. Some odd and profounder adverb has to be discovered to grace verbally the experience of loving “Chaveh” (pronounced “Hava,” but with a guttural *H* like the *CH* in “Bach”), her Hebrew name.

I have said earlier that *being caused by* (the determinist implication) and *being influenced* or *limited by* are absolutely quite different matters, that circumstances do not cause but limit the choices available to one. The circumstances of my life, the Who I was, B.C.—“before Chaveh”—would not seem a logical predecessor of what was to be my life to come. “Southern mythic” I once called it. a perfectly normal Southern boy, no brighter I did not think, or do not remember, than my friends and just as culturally bound, my ambitions swinging between being a soldier or being a second-baseman. The latter ended with my last year in junior high school when I batted in the .370 range but when not hitting for extra bases never singled, walked, grounded out or flied out—always striking out instead, a rare negative

achievement. Sports still, however, defined my world as I became sports editor of my school paper and sports writer for my college mag. Accepting my recognized limits, I assumed a career on some respectable local –type newspaper.

I enlisted, after one college year, in the army, no longer thinking as I had when ten of a military life, but conforming to that Southern feeling regnant at the time that military service was something that a real man did. My assumed limits and interests broadened somewhat during my army service, primarily because of responding to the circumstance of spending most of my army time—by sheer luck of assignment and not because of any deserts—in an exceptionally intelligent unit populated by men who were so smart they could not complete officer candidate school. (I am not being ironic!) Responding to the atmosphere and accepting recommendations, I began reading relatively broadly and enjoyed the barracks conversations that were superior (I later discovered) to the mythic dormitory conversations of college, finding I liked talking about, say, Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* or Plato's *Symposium.*

So, by the time I was demobilized I was uncertain between sports journalism and a life of talking about books, which meant teaching. The latter would be in some small college, I assumed, as I began and eventually completed graduate work, stumbling through three different universities. It was sheer luck, I assure you, that after a long sequence of choices quite comfortably within my coherent circumstances, I found myself a faculty member at one of the constituent colleges of The City University of New York instead of at Podunk Tech. I quite personally hit it off with my two principal job-interviewers, a lovely older woman who simply liked me and winked at me as she asked questions as hard as a softball, and a fellow Southerner who would become a close and admired friend (about whom someday I'd like to write an essay).

Being a college professor in New York may seem an unlikely station for the high school sports editor, but that's delusional. While my home town was not a college town exactly, it did house a small college in transition from a teachers' "normal School"—but more significant, the kid with delusions of future military heroism never aspired to be a doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief, or any kind of business man or anything of that nature, and being teacher or professor is not a world away from journalist. And besides—years before I made a life-altering switch to the Philosophy Department—I remember quite distinctly riding on the "el" just before it descended to subway on the way from the borough of Queens into Manhattan—I mean I remember it quite starkly—thinking, "Well, this isn't so bad; I'll be the American Literature specialist at the college, pretty good in fact." I had already mined my dissertation for a couple of scholarly articles (which Chaveh calls "farticles"), one of them in the journal for publications insuring ne'er-do-well profs don't perish, *The Explicator*.

What I mean to say is that my life B.C. was radically different from what it has become A.C. (after Chaveh). And there is an *apparent* significance and an *actual* significance to that. My life seems to me unpredictably interesting as I reflect upon it (although maybe, I suspect, not so interesting to the reader, for which I apologize but stubbornly soldier on).

I have paid a professional price for switching "fields" and for refusing to hew to an academic specialty, the price of never inspiring the least interest from Ivy-Leaguish or other elite institutions of higher education. But I have happily, and luckily, been able to pursue a kind of free intellectual life. Avoiding academic journals, I have composed reviews and essays ("think pieces") in literary criticism (of fiction and poetry), history (of ideas and of people), religion, biography, personal memoir, politics, and of course

philosophy. I have reflected on the peculiarities of the American South, on Spanish history and culture, the military mind, Nazi Germany, Adolph Hitler, Albert Speer, Saint Augustine, Judaism, Saint Paul, baseball, the Book of Job, Israel, antisemitism, "the Gentile problem," murder, the popes, Vinegar Joe Stilwell, John Wayne, George Orwell, the politics of rape, etc. and so forth. And I have been lucky enough to make my thoughts public in scads of reputable cultural reviews and journals of opinion, including *NER*, of which I am honored to be a contributing editor. I receive the occasional correspondence from readers stateside and abroad, which pleases me since it allows me to assume I've not been practicing mere intellectual masturbation.

I've been fortunate to travel—England, Ireland, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and to live for extended periods of time in Spain—plus one afternoon in Iceland with the cold rain blowing sideways. While in movement or settled I've enjoyed enormously interesting (and often generous) friends I never, before Chaveh, would have thought to meet, from Swedish shrink to German actor and co-founder of the German "Greens" and dozens in between. Before I seem to be merely boastful instead of grateful I assure the reader I am approaching a philosophical point.

I have enjoyed this life (punctuated by a great deal of pain, agony, which are another story not for now) in great part as the result of my attachment to and blessings from the beautiful and gracious and enormously talented and brilliant Chaveh: poet, lyrical dramatist, translator of French and Spanish verse, intellectual essayist and critic, and linguist (French, Spanish, Yiddish)—and, privately, my "designated reader" without whom I would be rendered half-mute, and the greatest surprise of my life. This I have no intention of trying to prove. I am the one who's been here and I know what I'm talking about. But if I'm taken to mean that Chaveh has been simply good for my career and social life, then I'm an

incompetent expositor. Rather:

Life with her has been akin to, or has *been*, an experience of grace. It hasn't been upward whatever, but deep something. . . . While I have never thought myself to be, or even aspired to be, an artist (after one ridiculous and well-lost short story in the tenth grade), I have at least since the days of barracks conversations in the army longed for some rewarding connection to the life-giving world of artistic creation. Whenever I read Wallace Stevens' magnificent "The Idea of Order at Key West"—read it!—I feel that the poem is about Chaveh, although I know that (1935) is impossible.

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which he sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Applied to Chaveh I know those last two lines exaggerate, for she knows other worlds, but none so beautiful. But *this* is not all! I have never known anyone so responsible, so giving, nor one with so much to give. Now whether one buys all this, or even if I'm so far thought to be merely a besotted rhapsodist, I am going to recall a remarkable scene which will tax my non-existent dramatic talent. Responsible, giving?

A few years ago we attended a public reading by a literary celebrity with an exaggerated reputation as a poet. After the reading, and a brief visit to the men's room, I joined the reception, wine and *hors d'oeurves*, and saw Chaveh in conversation with celebrity and a couple of attendees, one

of whom I recognized immediately, although I had not seen him since my last year in grad school roughly 30 to 35 years before, since he'd retained his boyish good looks. I rushed over intending to exclaim his surname, which friends and colleagues called him instead of his first name: "Craig," I'll call him now, which is disguise enough. But Chaveh, recognizing my intention, gestured an unmistakable silent "Shushhh" so I just smiled incoherently.

Back when I knew Craig he had just published the book of poems with which he made his splash on the literary scene: good reviews, nomination for a book award, a Guggenheim soon, an international *Prix* of some sort. In the years since, however, his star had faded—as his talent had not—while the poetry establishment was busy ignoring lyricism in favor of the gutsy prose utterance wannabe-poets could manage and lit-profs assuming tough-guy stances enthuse about. You're unlikely to find him in any anthology now, where his inferiors, like the celebrity reader, congregate.

His eyesight, pretty bad when I had last seen him, had now declined radically, an inch or two from legal blindness it must have been, so my intended exclamation would only have confused him since he clearly did not recognize me. Nor, to my amazement, had he recognized Chaveh, who had not seen him five or six years longer than I had not, whose looks had lasted as well as his had, better rather: I've seen photographs of how she looked when she and Craig were boy-and-girl-friends in college. Indeed, Craig was the author of the poem about the "frail asymmetry of her face."

So I was amazed to observe and hear their conversation, as Chaveh—to my frustration—never once alluded to their past. "I recognize you from a book jacket," or something like that, "You're Rob Craig." He is delighted and looks pleased toward his wife, a new one I realize. "You know my poetry, then?" "Yes I do," and Chaveh begins quoting passages of it, to Craig's great pleasure and his wife's

obvious pride. “I’ve never known anyone with such recall for poems,” Craig says, while happy to discover a “fan.” It took great presence of mind for me not to exclaim “Oh yes you have!” Chaveh never mentions that she too is a poet, never reveals the name he would have known her by back in the day, never takes over in a fashion that might interfere with Craig’s obvious joy, his delight to shine in his new wife’s eyes, and, I imagine, his pleasure in thinking that his career was not such a fading memory after all.

Later, when I protested “How could you not tell him!?” Chaveh said “Couldn’t you see how he beamed, how much pleasure he had, what an affirmation it was? To deny him that would have been hurtful.” Recently when I recalled that evening to Chaveh, she quoted Shakespeare’s sonnet about “they who have power to hurt and will do none,’ and I added “they rightly do inherit heaven’s graces.” I think Chaveh’s actions were an incredible exercise in moral discipline. Responsible? Giving? Yes.

In any case the reader will credit the following: when life turns out to be so radically different and unexpected in the most essential manner, there is a popular temptation, perhaps even with a feeling of certainty attached, to say something like “Well, I guess it just had to be, y’ know, it was destined to be, it seems it was fated to be.” And I have intentionally made that response easier by insisting earlier that my life B.C. provided no circumstance which made likely what later came to be. However, with a big however . . .

That does not mean, and it is absurd to think it does mean, that what came to be was not the consequence of one or many long sequences of conscious and deliberate *choices*, exercises of the freedom of the will. For the notion of destiny or fate is nothing but a poeticizing of that “soft determinism” discussed much earlier which is really no determinism at all: a fanciful and imaginative and perhaps pleasing way of naming the effects of actions and

judgments—*choices*—made from those available because of previous circumstances and choices/actions/judgments therein. To say that destiny or fate truly designates any kind of real—that is to say *hard*—determinism is either just plain foolishness, or a perhaps understandable attempt to make life seem more magical and aesthetically pleasing, like a poem or a fairy tale.

Seen this way, the illusion of destiny, fate, the "it-had-to-be," is an innocent human habit—and maybe even responsible for a great deal of great art, and even a respectful way of talking about a love affair and its consequences. But I forgive the inclination only when it's a matter of someone talking about someone else and not about himself. For when it's an auto-biographical fantasy of destiny or fate it is most likely—or inevitably, I think—a way of claiming to be oh so much more special, unique, than one likely is; as if to think oneself a darling of the mythical goddesses (whether one recalls his Greek mythology or not), Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos: as if to imagine "I am so *velly, velly, eemportant!*" But even this first-person foolishness has a kind of innocence, even while too proud.

But as anything approaching a philosophic doctrine . . . that's something else altogether, and about as innocent as murder. Do I seem to be getting carried away and riled up? I admit that's so. For I'm convinced that any embrace of a *hard* determinism (which *soft* determinisms are always in danger of inclining towards, usually in order to seem philosophically serious), any such embrace outside the strict realm of natural science where it belongs and instead invading the realm of what I have called "the moral universe" of human behavior, the proper world of ethics, is not only philosophically wrong. . . but degrading and immoral! I'm now going to revisit some ideas of William James from "The Dilemma of Determinism," pilfering readily.

The central distinction between the free will thesis

and determinism *in the realm of human action* is that (1) the former proposes that for every human choice of action there are numbers of possible choices and therefore numbers of consequences, that for every single thing we make actually happen there had been before the choice an excess of possibilities, while (2) the latter proposes that for every actuality that occurs there had been only one possibility, that possibilities and actualities are the exact same in number, so that to say a person chooses this or that course of action is merely a careless and meaningless way of not-saying that he or she took or yielded to the only possibility actually available, that choice therefore is a delusion.

O.K., says William James, let me think about this. And so he thinks (or does so in my characterization) thusly: Things don't always go the way I wish they had. Sometimes because of events beyond my control, out of my hands, such as, say, that ice-storm. Sometimes because of events well within my control, as when I advised my friend to drive off in that storm and he slid off a cliff, the late Jimbo, or was it Fred? Now, when something terrible happens whether it's *not* my fault or whether it *is* my fault I will feel sorry for it (unless I'm a despicable cad with no empathy or sense of responsibility). James calls this a "judgment of regret"—a nice term, I think.

But, if I am a determinist it makes no sense for me to feel "sorry," for (now I pilfer), as James points out, "if the thing that was done was the only thing that could have been done because in the determinist's world possibilities and actualities are equal in number, it really makes no sense for the determinist, the necessitarian, to make a judgment of regret about something that necessarily had to be. A judgment of regret is logically inconsistent with his worldview." Of course, according to James, the determinist may avoid the logical inconsistency by *getting rid of the judgment of regret,* expressing no sorrow at all. (Even though this implies making a choice after all!)

But the determinist is now hung up among being (1) an intellectually ridiculous wretch unaware of his own freedom of will, ability to choose, (2) a dishonest wretch avoiding the fact that his determinism is hollow, a lie, or (3) a callow, immoral son of a bitch who feels no regret for what has occurred. What do you call a person who is without the capacity, or *willingness* (!), to make a judgment of regret? I'm not sure, but certainly not a human—or humane—being. In any case, determinism outside the narratives of falling apples, snow, and temperature, et al, is not only philosophically hollow, but morally repulsive. I think I put that too lightly.

I'd like to close these reflections on a more upbeat note, hard to do for a native pessimist. But the first word in this essay is *Love*, so to it I return. I have said much earlier that when that stunning falling occurred back in that cafeteria I felt somehow endangered—and not only because I knew life would change radically, but because I sensed without knowing why or how that *she* somehow was meant for danger. I could pass that off, I suppose, as my native pessimism at work. But, in retrospect:

I recently quoted in another context Wallace Stevens—as I'm obviously given to doing—with some reservation. In "Sunday Morning" he wrote "Death is the mother of beauty, mystical." I think he got it backwards: rather, "beauty is the mother of death," I'd say. By which I mean that all beautiful things are *vulnerable.* Intuitively (and who understands intuition?) this strikes me as a law of nature. *Vulnerability* could be Chaveh's middle name. I have mentioned a couple of times the agony that accompanies ecstasy. I've glanced at the face of suffering. There was a period of time (thank God passed) approaching two decades that was like a medical epic: I think of it as the Nightmare Years. Not *my* health, which has generally been robust, but *our* Nightmare.

But all in all, I have no regrets about dining in that

cafeteria all those years ago. And I thank the Good Lord for giving us that faculty of choice that ungrateful and delusional determinists would *choose* to deny.

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