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The French Revolution:
A Matter of Circumstances?

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We live in an age of circumstances – historiographically, that is. Over the past few decades, the place of metanarrative and grand theory in history writing has given way to “contingency” and the “accidental.” The notion of history as unfolding according to some underlying logic has ceded to the notion of history as disjointed – as full of unforeseen twists and unintended turns. In following history’s crooked line, some scholars of late have ventured into the realm of the emotions – those complex areas of consciousness that often defy rational intentions. When treated together, circumstances and the emotions often steer historians toward an existentialist reading of the past: individuals act but with little control over the conditions or the mental processes that propel them toward particular choices.

This essay examines the place of circumstances and contingency in French Revolutionary historiography. I show that, time and again, historians have invoked these concepts to free history from the “shackles” of metanarrative and theory. But retreats into “circumstances” and “contingency” do not last long. Metanarrative and theoretical frameworks inevitably return. In recent times, this return has come in the form of emotions history. This essay considers the implications of this dual emphasis on contingency and the emotions for historical agency. I argue that history, when told as the story of unforeseen circumstances, unintended consequences and unwilled emotions, can deepen our understanding

of how contemporaries experienced their lives, but it also raises methodological questions about ethical agency and its connection to historical consequences.

Notions of “contingency” and “circumstances” have surged in recent historical scholarship over the past few decades. In an article appearing in *The American Historical Review (AHR)* in 2013, Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail quantified the rising frequency of the terms “contingent” and “contingency” in the pages of this same academic journal since the 1970s (Graph 1).¹ Use of the concept exploded at the turn of the century. Whereas historians invoked the term roughly thirty times between 1995 and 1995, ten years later (between 2005 and 2009) they invoked it over three hundred times.

Graph 1. Number of articles and books in the *AHR* in which the term “contingen*” appears at least once, between 1975 and 2009.

The authors generally welcome this trend. Contingency, they believe, “is an idea of great usefulness” since it challenges deterministic metanarratives. They note, however, that, when taken to extremes, contingency hinders efforts to tell any coherent story about long stretches of time. “High contingency,” they argue, leads to analytical cul-de-sacs. More importantly, they insist that contingency, despite its pervasiveness in the discipline today, has failed to debunk metanarratives about modernity. History may follow crooked lines over short stretches, but

¹ Shryock and Smail, “History and the *pre-*”, Figure 4, 719.

when longer periods are considered, a border inevitably emerges, explicitly or implicitly, between the modern and the pre-modern.

Use of the term “circumstances” also increased in the late twentieth century. Based on my analysis of the *AHR*, the term appeared with growing frequency between the 1960s and 2000, with a dramatic spike in the 1990s, just as “contingency” began to take off (Graph 2).

Graph 2. Number of articles using the term “circumstances” at least once in the *AHR* (1890–2019)

Although the term’s frequency has fallen since 2000, this decline may reflect a growing preference for the more technical term of “contingency” and its cognates. In any case, the frequency of the qualified formulation “*unforeseen* circumstances” between the 1890s and the present shows a rise in use in recent decades. Of the fifty-five occurrences of the catchphrase in the *AHR* since the journal’s founding, more than half (twenty-nine) have appeared since 1990.

This growing emphasis on contingency and circumstances is reflected in recent French Revolutionary historiography, especially in explanations of the Terror. To take just a few examples from the past decade or so: Peter McPhee: “The year of ‘terror until peace’ is best explained by an explosion of circumstances and convictions.” Timothy Tackett: “Circumstances had a powerful impact on the coming of the Terror [along with emotions].” Marisa Linton: “... the path that led to terror [... involved] contingent events and individual choices in the context of shifting circumstances.” I have woven circumstances into my own historical arguments as well: “Indeed, I believe that

circumstances go further than ideas in explaining the different courses that free speech took in the early French and American republics.”²

Of course, contingency and circumstances are not new concepts. They have been at the center of debates over historical methods since the profession’s early days. In his 1910 article “The Circumstance of the Substance of History,” Frederick Teggart, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, urged historians to think more like social scientists and explain change rather than limiting themselves to describing changing circumstances.

Teggart acknowledged the importance of reconstructing circumstances, and he respected the critical approach to archival research developed by Leopold von Ranke in the first half of the nineteenth century. But describing circumstances was not enough. He called for grasping the “substance” of history, by which he meant processes of change, and he pointed to Darwin’s theory of evolution as an epistemological model. Darwin did not simply describe his empirical evidence. He reflected on it, drew connections and induced underlying processes. Teggart criticized his fellow historians for being too much “Ranke” and not enough “Darwin,” “confining themselves solely to the exposition of positive facts without attempting to draw from them inductions.”³

Teggart’s distinction between empirical facts and processes of change – between the “circumstances” and the “substance” of history – was unfair to Ranke. As Georg Iggers has shown, it was early twentieth-century American historians, such as Teggart, who turned Ranke into a shallow, fact-grubbing

² McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 272; Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*, 348; Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 270; Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution*, 235.

³ Teggart, “The Circumstance or the Substance of History”, esp. 709–10.

positivist.⁴ They mistranslated Ranke's motto "Wie es eigentlich gewesen" as "history as it *really* was" instead of "history as it *essentially* was." Essence, for Ranke, was the spirit of the age, which contained within it the elements of historical change. Ranke believed that history unfolded through organic processes in the relations among individuals, nations and states. Facts needed to be gathered and assessed, to be sure, but the historian also had to intuit their interconnectedness. And although he rejected Hegel's belief that history was propelled by a dialectical tension between the "rational" and the "real," he nevertheless saw history as driven by a tension between universal religions and the particularities of nations.⁵ Providence, for Ranke, was the ultimate engine of historical change. And although he doubted that historians could ever fully grasp it, he believed they could get nearer to it by patiently reconstructing the past through archives and tracing the processes of change inherent in them.

In practice, of course, historians generally combine the two approaches: they reconstruct contexts through evidence and description, and they explain change using theory and conceptual frameworks. Mid twentieth-century Marxist historians of the French Revolution adopted both approaches but applied them to different levels of analysis. To understand the medium *durée* structuring the Revolution's plate tectonics, they embraced the theory of class struggle and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. To understand the Terror (1793–94), however, they pointed to circumstances. In his overview of the French

⁴ Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, , xi–xlv.

⁵ Woolf, *A Concise History of History*, 177.

Revolution, Albert Soboul concluded that the political violence of the Year II was to “be explained by the special circumstances of the moment.”⁶

Early revisionist historians also espoused the thesis of circumstances but put even more stress on it. They criticized the Marxists, not for their reliance on circumstances to explain the Terror but for their reliance on the “deterministic” theory of class struggle. In “The Myth of the French Revolution” (1955), Alfred Cobban quoted Alexis de Tocqueville to express his disdain for theory. “[How] I hate those absolute systems which derive all the events in history from great first causes, link one to another in a chain of destiny, and, so to speak, eliminate men from history.”⁷ Much like E. P. Thompson two decades later (though with very different politics), Cobban believed that theory diminished human agency.⁸

In a later essay, “Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution” (1958), Cobban criticized Marxist theories of history of being too formulaic. “The problem of the causes [of the French Revolution] is no longer to find an equation, $a + b \pm c = d$, but to analyze, as well as one can, the elements in an enormously complex and changing historic situation [i.e., circumstances], and to trace the process by which it was translated into another situation.”⁹ The advice sounds commonsensical, but it skirts the very problem Cobban sought to explain: causation. What, precisely, is the nature of this “process” by which one set of circumstances is “translated” into another? Is it organic and therefore specific to the historical context itself? Perhaps, although Cobban appears to treat circumstances (“historic situations”) as one thing and “processes” of

⁶ Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799*, 386.

⁷ Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, 94.

⁸ Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*.

⁹ Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, 65–66.

“translation” as another, much as Teggart had. It is not clear that Cobban saw circumstances as the sole and unique drivers of historical change.

That shift came with the young François Furet and Denis Richet’s *La Révolution française* (1965). They put circumstances and contingency at the heart of their analysis. Instead of positing “set of circumstances A,” injecting them into some “process,” and deriving “set of circumstances B,” Furet and Richet saw change inhering in historical circumstances themselves. They adopted this view to combat the historical determinisms of the political right (which attributed the Revolution to the Enlightenment) and political left (which attributed it to class struggle). “Were the events of 10 August 1792,” when the monarchy fell, “the culmination of some inevitable historical process?”¹⁰ No, they concluded. “To escape from the snares of this kind of determinist history, let us put the problem in very different terms and ask ourselves this question: [...] what exactly were the historical ‘accidents’ that led to the failure of the liberal revolution of the eighteenth century?”¹¹

But attributing change to accidents was not very satisfying in the end. After all, where does one go after describing history as a series of train wrecks? Even Furet got bored with the approach. Less than a decade later, he offered a devastating critique of the theory of circumstances and turned to ideology to explain change. Oddly, he did not scrutinize his and Richet’s thesis of circumstances. Instead, he criticized Marxist historians for relying on circumstances to explain – or explain away – the Terror. His *Pensée la Révolution* of 1978 is contradictory on this point. In some passages, he accuses Marxists of

¹⁰ Furet and Richet, *The French Revolution*, 122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

straightjacketing their evidence to make it fit their script, beginning with effects (social and political transformation) then deriving causes (class struggle, changes in the modes of production).¹² But in others, he criticizes them for arguing that the circumstances of war led to the Terror. What they failed to see, he insisted, was how the war was itself the effect of ideology, specifically, Rousseauian ideas of virtue and the social contract. “The truth is,” he wrote, “the Terror was an integral part of revolutionary ideology, which, just as it shaped action and political endeavor during that period, gave its own meaning to ‘circumstances’ that were largely of its own making.”¹³ “There were no revolutionary circumstances,” he concluded, “there was a Revolution that fed on circumstances.”¹⁴

According to Furet, then, Marxist historians of the French Revolution could do no right. Their theory of class conflict was too deterministic, but their reliance on circumstances to explain the Terror overlooked how circumstances were determined by ideology.

Something of a parting of the ways in French Revolutionary historiography occurred with the rise of cultural history in the 1980s. While some historians took a sociocultural path, others took the linguistic turn. The sociocultural historians continued to focus on socioeconomic life and circumstances while dropping Marxist teleology and rigid class categories. (That said, the bourgeoisie and the transition from feudalism to capitalism have made

¹² Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, especially the essay “The Revolutionary catechism,” 81–131.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

something of a comeback in recent years.¹⁵) Many took up the study of “experience” – an analytical concept pioneered by E. P. Thompson. Experience has been central to much of Peter McPhee’s work, especially *Living the French Revolution, 1789–99*, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* and his recent *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution*.¹⁶ These studies show how individuals, from rural peasants to legislators in Paris, experienced events and how their experiences shaped their convictions and actions. In general, the logic of “experience” history runs something like this: traditions and contingency mix to produce experience, which, in turn, generates consciousness and agency.

While sociocultural historians were reconstructing lived experience, discourse historians, especially in the United States, were reconstructing the conceptual frames through which experience was understood and expressed. Analysis focused on language, representation, and symbols.¹⁷ In her *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (1985) and *The Family Romance and the French Revolution* (1992), Lynn Hunt drew on cultural and psychological theories – Clifford Geertz’s “cultural frames”, Sigmund Freud’s “oedipal complex” and René Girard’s “sacrificial crisis” – to interpret the French Revolution.¹⁸ Keith M. Baker drew on Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis, filtering it through the methods developed by Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School. He attributed the Revolution’s radical course to the inherent logic of political discourse,

¹⁵ Sewell, “Connecting Capitalism to the French Revolution;” Clay, “The Bourgeoisie, Capitalism, and the Origins of the French Revolution.” For works engaging with Marx’s “means of exchange” (or those of Marxist philosophers) and of the morality surrounding them, see Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* and Walton, “Capitalism’s Alter-Ego: The Birth of ‘Reciprocity’ in Eighteenth-century France.” For the shift from feudal to modern forms of property, see Blaufarb, *The Great Demarcation*.

¹⁶ McPhee, *Living the French Revolution; Robespierre; and Liberty or Death*.

¹⁷ For a critique of social experience and defense of linguistic conceptual frameworks, see Scott, “The Evidence of Experience.”

¹⁸ Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution; The Family Romance and the French Revolution*.

specifically, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas about political will and moral regeneration.¹⁹ In "discourse" histories, circumstances tended to be ornamental, embellishing accounts of historical change that were ultimately propelled by ideological and semiotic forces.

The linguistic turn was short-lived. By the mid-1990s, even Lynn Hunt was calling for historians to adopt "practical realism" and a return to "facts."²⁰ And although Baker remained committed to discourse analysis, he treated discourses less as determinants (he distanced himself from his earlier claim that revolutionaries, in adopting Rousseau's language of political will in 1789, "opted for the Terror") than as "conditions of possibility."²¹ Historians abandoned the search for "causes," which now seemed naively deterministic, in order to identify "origins," which were more open-ended. Space opened up for contingency, circumstances and creative agency. Nothing *had* to happen the way it did. Contingency and choice inflected the course of history at each fork in the road.

The renewed stress on "contingency" and "circumstances" in the mid-1990s – a phenomenon reflected in *The American Historical Review*, as we have seen – had an impact on notions of historical change. There was something of a return to Ranke's organicism – the idea that the forces of change were intrinsic to the specificities of the historical situation. Timothy Tackett foregrounded circumstances to explain the origins of the Terror in *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)*.²² Most of his study traces the process of polarization in the National Assembly during the first year of the Revolution. It

¹⁹ Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*.

²⁰ Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*.

²¹ Baker, "A Foucauldian French Revolution?," 187–205.

²² Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 312–313.

was less ideology than the experience of tumultuous change that turned the deputies into revolutionaries. But rather than link this experience and polarization to the Revolution's slide into the Terror of 1793–94, Tackett argues that, to the contrary, there was nothing in this polarization process that made the Terror inevitable. It was subsequent contingent events – and especially the failed flight of the king from France in 1791, the topic of his next book, *When the King Took Flight* – that sent an otherwise viable constitutional monarchy to its doom.²³

But just as Furet had turned to “ideology” to broaden his and Richet’s prior focus on contingency, Tackett broadened his “circumstances” thesis by analyzing emotions in his *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (2015).²⁴ Tackett was not alone in taking this “emotions” turn. Many historians in our historiographical “age of circumstances” have sought to combine contingency and the emotions in their analyses. In doing so, however, they have altered notions of historical agency, which had been central and influential in the works of E. P. Thompson. For Thompson, historical conditions and circumstances shaped agency but did not determine it. His *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) drew inspiration from Marx’s insight in *The Eighteenth of Brumaire* about history’s creativity and constraints: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”²⁵ A libertarian communist, Thompson stressed the initiative and inventiveness of historical agents. He opposed the “hard”

²³ Tackett, *When the King Took Flight*.

²⁴ Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*.

²⁵ Marx, *The Eighteenth of Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 7.

Marxism of Stalinist scholars of the 1950s, who considered the involuntary drivers of human action. Like Cobban and de Tocqueville (though, again, with radically different politics), he sought to restore free will to historical actors. He depicted them as beating a path through a thicket of constraints to forge their own identities, solidarities and consciousness. His protagonists were in command of their intellectual, moral and emotional capacities: "Such men," he writes of his early nineteenth-century working-class heroes, "met Utilitarianism in their daily lives, and they sought to throw it back, not blindly, but with intelligence and moral passion."²⁶ They may have lost the historical battle, but they were not history's fools.

Recent work on the French Revolution focusing on circumstances and the emotions alters this Thompsonian balance between free will and non-volitional forces, tilting it towards the latter. Instead of setting parameters for agency, circumstances and emotions together short-circuit it, producing mental conflicts that lead people to act in ways they never intended. Circumstances and the emotions get the better of French revolutionaries, derailing them from their high-minded principles and projects. They still have agency but of an existential sort: they must choose to act but under conditions that deprive them of any meaningful control over their circumstances, historical consequences and even their consciousness.

This existentialist understanding of agency shows through in much recent work on the French Revolution and the Terror, including my own. I cite (and implicitly sympathize with) early revolutionary legislators who recognized that revolutionary circumstances were not ideal for implementing their cherished

²⁶ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 832.

principle of freedom of expression.²⁷ Passions ran too high, and notions of honor were too strong for revolutionary leaders to be able to shrug off the torrent of insults and calumny that freedom of expression had unleashed. Injurious speech triggered anger and punitive impulses, which propelled the Terror, when nearly a third of the “suspects” arrested were charged with speech crimes. In some cases, insulted leaders found themselves pressured to seek vengeance even when they did not want to, since their individual honor had become inseparable from that of their constituents, supporters and “the nation.” The absence of libel law and breakdown of civil justice – both contingencies – compounded the problem. In my reading, revolutionaries did not intentionally “will” this mess. They found themselves caught up in a maelstrom of unforeseen circumstances and emotional dynamics that they could not control – so I argued.

In *Choosing Terror*, Marisa Linton shows revolutionaries making choices under similar conditions. Those choices were determined largely by their educations (which taught them to love virtue), circumstances (war) and emotions (fear). The combination of these factors drove ordinary individuals to act in ways they never intended. Linton’s revolutionaries have agency – they choose. But they do not appear to have much free will. She concludes a chapter on Robespierre with a quote from the contemporary René Levasseur, with whom she seems to agree: “The Terror was a collective response to a desperate situation, born out ‘of circumstances and not the will of men’.”²⁸ If this is true – and Linton makes a persuasive case that it was – does agency in the Thompsonian sense still have any relevancy? Was terror really a choice or did

²⁷ Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution*, 135–36.

²⁸ Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 270.

contingent circumstances and emotional dynamics make it all but a foregone conclusion? If it was a choice, what were the plausible alternatives?

To point out the implications of the thesis of circumstances and the emotions for historical agency is not to deny the considerable impact of these factors. The works of Peter McPhee, Marisa Linton, Timothy Tackett, William Reddy, Sophie Wahnich, and Lynn Hunt, among others, which pursue this line of interpretation, have given us a deeper understanding of revolutionary subjectivity.²⁹ And the approach makes a great deal of intuitive sense. It is clear that individuals do not entirely control their circumstances and that their emotions can compel them to behave in unintended ways. What I wish to draw attention to is what this means for our understanding of historical agency. How much of a disconnect do we want to posit between intentions and outcomes? Is history, told as the story of unintended consequences, useful for thinking about our own historical agency today?

It is not surprising that invocations of “unintended consequences” have risen alongside “contingency” and “unforeseen circumstances” over the past two decades. The three notions share the premise that there is indeed a disconnect between what is in people’s minds and how history unfolds. Developed in the early to mid-twentieth century by the sociologist Robert Merton and frequently employed by economists since then, the catchphrase “unintended consequences” has come to pervade the discipline of history in recent decades.³⁰ Its frequency in *The American Historical Review* doubled between the 1980s and the 2000s and

²⁹ The relevant works of Linton, McPhee and Tackett have been cited above. See also Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*; Wahnich, *In Defense of the Terror*; and Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*.

³⁰ Merton, “The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action.” For a recent synthesis of how economists use the concept, see Aydinonat, *The Invisible Hand: How Economists Explain Unintended Social Consequences*.

has doubled again between the 2000s and today (Graph 3). If we are living in an age of “circumstances” and “contingency”, we are also living in the age of “unintended consequences”: we tend to portray agents as the unwitting architects of their own dilemmas and failures.

Graph 3: Use of the term “unintended consequences” in the *AHR* (1940–2019)

Like “contingency” and “unforeseen circumstances”, the thesis of “unintended consequences” is defensible in small doses. Taken too far, it poses problems, not least for how we understand our own historical agency. If intentions have little relation to consequences once they pass through the blender of circumstances and the emotions, on what basis should we choose to act today? The thesis of “unintended consequences” runs the risk of reducing history to a series of accidental “one-offs” – “one damned thing after another”, as historian Arnold Toynbee derisively put it – or of situating causation so far beyond the realm of intentions that humans are depleted of ethical agency. They are buffeted by forces they cannot comprehend, much less control, including (once emotions are triggered) their own consciousness.

As dark clouds form on our own historical horizons – constitutional crises, rising authoritarianism, online disinformation and manipulation of emotions, looming environmental catastrophe – we will be compelled, by the force of circumstances, to act. We will have to make choices. But if history becomes the story of unforeseen circumstances, unintended consequences and

unwilled emotions, can it provide us with any lessons? “Purists,” such as Ranke, would insist that providing lessons is not within the historian’s remit.³¹ If that is the case, then we might as well limit ourselves to an *ethics of conviction*. That is, we might as well act according to our beliefs and let the consequences be damned since we cannot control them anyway. It seems to me, however, that history is better suited to an *ethics of responsibility*. This requires, as Max Weber explained, “giving an account of the foreseeable results of one’s actions.”³² It involves thinking through potential consequences and calibrating the pursuit of ideals to the circumstances. Recent histories of the French Revolution that stress circumstances and the emotions can be useful in this regard: they help us see how emotions, under certain conditions, can lead to actions that go against stated convictions. But if historians focus only on the choices actors made and not the ones they could have made but did not, there is a risk of lapsing into determinism. Moreover, once circumstances are seen to generate emotions that propel individuals to behave in ways that undermine or contradict their beliefs, it becomes difficult to discern any link between beliefs, will, and consequences.

How, then, might we avoid depicting past actors as history’s prisoners and dupes? One way might be to engage in counterfactual reflection – to consider the plausible choices those actors could have made *even in light of their circumstances and emotions*. After all, if a contingency-based explanation points to only one outcome (what happened), it is perforce deterministic.

Counterfactuals give contingency room to breathe, opening up space for agency and choice. Historians generally dismiss counterfactuals as amateurish

³¹ Ranke, *The Secret of World History*, 58.

³² Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 120.

speculation. They shouldn't. Strong arguments have been made by philosophers of history that counterfactuals hover in the background of all historical analysis. Martin Bunzl observes that when historians "make causal claims," elevating one set of factors over others to explain events, "then counterfactual claims come along for the ride, like it or not."³³ So why not come clean and address them head on? Nor do counterfactuals require flights into fancy. Good counterfactual reasoning hews closely to context, or "conditions of possibility." It imagines what might have happened if one conditioned possibility (plausible by definition) had been chosen over another. Counterfactuals require expertise – a deep understanding of the causal forces that produce circumstances and an ability to discern their relative preponderance and interconnections. They sharpen causal reasoning by encouraging the historian to assess where historical factors lie on the spectrum between influence and constraint. Most importantly, counterfactuals reinforce the ethical agency we ascribe to historical actors. Those actors may have been conditioned or constrained by various forces, including their emotions, but they did have choices, and choosing *y* instead of *x* might have produced a different outcome.

Of course, the primary task of historians is to explain what *did* happen. But reflecting on the paths not taken can make history useful to "think with" as we navigate our own "complex and changing historic situation" (Cobban). Such an approach can help turn past "unforeseens" into future "foreseeables," or at least "likely possibilities" since circumstances never fully repeat themselves. Approaching history from this angle would enhance our own sense of historical

³³ Bunzl, "Counterfactual History," 846.

agency, reminding us that there is at least some connection between what we will and the world we create.

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