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Free Will, Determinism, and the Names of Places

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If there had not been a George *Washington* (1732–1799) there would today be no Washington, D.C. And if there had not been a Christopher *Columbus* (1451–1506) there would today be no Columbus, Ohio. If the idealism of William Penn (1644–1718) and the friendliness of the Quakers had not prevailed in the early history of Pennsylvania, there would not now be the historic city of Philadelphia. These causative, self-evident conclusions will explain to the reader why, in one and the same title, I have commingled placenames and the debatable doctrines of free will and determinism. Really, between the three (as I shall illustrate) there is a close relationship. To give definitions, the determinist believes that everything, including names of places, is caused, all phenomena being an unbroken and unbreakable chain of pervasive cause and effect. The believer in freedom of the will (a voluntarist or libertarian) usually accepts the belief of the determinist, but he thinks in addition that we have within us, by means of a "free" will, the power to control and direct our choices, even to the extent (sometimes) of changing or breaking natural laws. To use, for instance, the example of Cairo, Illinois, the determinist would seek a tangible cause for the name (such as its location, like Cairo, Egypt, on a great river), whereas the libertarian would discuss the commercial arguments and conflicts of will that led to Cairo's official charter in 1818. In the accompanying paragraphs, I shall, without taking sides, describe and consider a dozen similar examples. The provenance of every placename has in it, so I find, aspects both of determinism and free will.

I. Free Will (Libertarianism, Voluntarism) illustrated and discussed in the case of five communities and two streets:

A. *Kiccowtan (Kecoughtan; today Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County, North Carolina).

1. *What happened.* In 1619 the name of this Powhatan village was changed to Elizabeth City by a general petition to the London Company drawn up in the Virginia Assembly. The petition was "that they [the petitioners] will be pleased to change the savage name of Kiccowtan, and

to give the Incorporation a new name.'' The petition was granted (Tyler 259).

2. *Aspects of free will.* In the rejection of *Kiccowtan it would be hard to find a clearer example of the part the human will (whether ''free'' or not) often plays in the selection and establishment of a placename. The petitioning Virginians willfully condemned *Kiccowtan as a ''savage'' name. And the company in London evidently agreed with the colonists. ''Savage'' refers to the bestial image of the Indians; the preference for *Elizabeth* suggests feelings of patiotism and English superiority. All persons concerned (here and in London) must certainly have had their wills buffeted by strong feelings against the Powhatans and equally strong loyalty to the British queen.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* Looked at objectively, Elizabeth City was caused mainly by a petition. However, the strong emotions of dislike for the Indians and their names and a characteristically British loyalty to Elizabeth – all aspects of free will – were influences one cannot ignore.

B. Woodward Avenue (Detroit, Michigan); *German Street (changed to Redwood Street, (Baltimore, Maryland)

1. *What happened.* a. Woodward Avenue – this fine Detroit street came into being after the ruinous fire of 1805, and commemorates territorial judge Augustus Woodward's determination to rebuild the city on the model of L'Enfant's Washington. The street gave Judge Woodward urban immortality and an enduring monument. b. *German Street – this downtown Baltimore business street no doubt originally arose from the city's appreciable German populace. For patriotic reasons it was changed during World War I to Redwood Street. Baltimore's feelings against the Germans and Germany were strong enough to change an important street name.

2. *Aspects of free will.* Strong feelings are illustrated by these street names – overpowering public outrage in connection with *German Street, strong will and determination in connection with Woodward Avenue by Judge Woodward. Moreover, it should be noticed that Woodward's will was influenced by L'Enfant.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* The Detroit fire of 1805 led to the rebuilding of the town and the eventual construction of Judge Woodward's avenue. The influence of L'Enfant determined the Detroit judge's grand plan. As for Baltimore's rejected German Street, the prime mover was World War I.

C. Wewanta (Lincoln County, West Virginia)

1. *What happened.* The people of this locality, strongly desiring a post

office, wrote the post office officials: "We want a post office." Owing to colloquial phraseology, the sentence became Wewanta. . . . Evidently the post office officials were willing.

2. *Aspects of free will.* Acts and struggles of will occurred on both sides. A choice had to be made, which meant a discussion of pros and cons. The tone of insistence suggests impatience and urgency.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* The name is undignified, even humorous. Perhaps this caused its selection.

D. Issue (Charles County, Maryland); Keedysville (Washington County, Maryland); New Windsor (Carroll County, Maryland). All three of these Maryland examples differ only in quirks of detail. They clearly illustrate the workings of the will. Nothing will be lost if I reduce the facts to one paragraph.

1. *What happened.* Issue arose from a controversy about which end of the village (north end or south) should be the site of a new post office. With the postal authorities this became an *issue*. The question annoyed federal officials so much that they called the place "Issue" in their correspondence. Eventually the name Issue was assigned, but to a compromise locality. Keedysville also came into being at the hands of postal officials. In this case, needing a different post office to avoid postal confusion, the citizens made a petition. So many Keedys signed the petition that the postal officials decided on Keedysville, an obvious and easy choice. I shall conclude with New Windsor, which was *Sulphur Spring in about 1816. It need only be said that tavern keeper Isaac Atlee refused a request to give has name to the town and referred the request to a visiting friend from Windsor, England. The Englishman was a little less modest than Atlee. He agreed to New Windsor, from his native British town.

2. *Aspects of free will.* To summarize, involved here are two decisions on the part of the postal hierarchy. Official annoyance occurs in the case of Issue; the influence of a petition is seen in the selection of Keedysville. In the case of New Windsor, Isaac Atlee's will was perhaps torn by the distress of decision making. The townspeople may have been annoyed by his refusal to give his name. To mention the incumbent (so to speak), the English friend may have felt pride, may have exulted in Atlee's friendliness, was perhaps gratified by the honor that was hereby given to his native town and country.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* The fact that there was an agreeable man there from England at the moment of need and decision, and also Atlee's refusal — these were (roughly stated) the causative movers.

II. Determinism (Necessity, Cause and Effect) illustrated and discussed in the case of one village and three cities.

A. Royal Oak (Talbot County, Maryland; explained by Muriel Dobbin in a 1961 Baltimore *Sun* article entitled "A Shot that Named a Town").

1. *What happened.* Two cannonballs, fired on this town by a British man-of-war in 1812, struck a "royal oak." It is not certain whether the name was already in use. Ms. Dobbin's title indicates that the name was caused by the shots.

2. *Aspects of free will.* A decision to shoot or not to shoot had to be made. The gunner may have had murderous intentions; on the other hand, he may have been only following orders.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* In a general sense, the War of 1812, the range of the cannons, the height and size of the oak, even the location of the town, all determined the resulting name. Ms. Dobbin, however, shows questionable judgment in attributing the name to "A shot."

B. Albuquerque (New Mexico).

1. *What happened.* Early in 1706, New Mexico's 28th colonial governor, Don Francisco Cuervo y Valdez, founded a villa which he named *Alburquerque* in honor of Don Francisco de la Cueva, Duke of Alburquerque, a viceroy of New Spain then resident in Mexico City (Pearce 5). Gannett states that the Duke of Alburquerque visited the spot in 1703–10. The place from which the original Dukes of Alburquerque came was at first a city in Portugal. Later it became a city in the province of Badajos, Spain. The Spanish city of Alburquerque bears on its seal the design of an oak tree. Obviously, the oak on the seal of Spanish Alburquerque has no connection with New Mexico, where oak trees do not flourish.

2. *Aspects of free will.* It was an act of will for Governor Cuervo y Valdez to name a villa in honor of Viceroy Cueva.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* If Portuguese Alburquerque had not become Spanish the Dukes of Alburquerque would not have been in New Spain to leave their names. The loss of Albu*r*querque's first *r* came about when 19th century English settlers did not pronounce it. The present spelling followed accordingly.

C. Atlanta (Georgia).

1. *What happened.* The place and placename, Atlanta, came about owing to the entrance into Georgia in 1836 of the pioneer railroad, the Western and Atlantic. It ran from north Georgia to south. Its first name, *Terminus (at the end of the line), was changed to *Marthasville (in 1834

for Governor Lumpkin's daughter). In 1846 the city charter changed the name to Atlanta. Atlanta comes from *Atlantic*.

2. *Aspects of free will.* Governor Lumpkin and his daughter no doubt made choices and decisions. Contests of will must have racked those who drew up the final charter.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* The causes and effects at work here are obvious, even predictable. The development of America's first railroads – necessary concomitants of the Industrial Revolution and (in this case) the magic of steam – was in 1840 exerting on places and names the impact of a juggernaut.

It may be said that there would be no Atlanta if the name of the railroad had been (for instance) Western and *Georgia*. Prof. Harder calls *Atlanta* a coinage (made up or invented) from *Atlantic*. The final *-a* makes a feminine noun out of what is otherwise an adjective. One wonders why *Atlantica*, or indeed *Atalanta*, was not chosen. It should be pointed out that the two mythological maidens (Arcadian Atalanta and Boeotian Atalanta) were both very swift of foot.

D. Chicago. Before I leave these instances of placename determinism, I think I should discuss one Indian placename. I have chosen Chicago. In a technical sense, however, Virgil Vogel leaves me little to say.

1. *What happened.* Henry Joutel (a survivor of La Salle's expedition) reached Chicago on Sept. 25, 1687. At that time he wrote in his journal that "according to what we could learn" the place named *Chicagou* takes its name from the quantity of *ail* [garlic] which grows in this district "dans les bois." Boulanger's French – Illinois dictionary equates *chicago* and *ail*. Later (p. 149) Boulanger gives *chicago* as the Illinois (cf. Miami) for stinking beast or skunk [*beste puante*]. In 1701 Lamothe Cadillac wrote: "The word means garlic river, because a very large quantity of garlic grows wild there without cultivation . . ." Carl Sandburg grasped the details in a verse "Early the red men gave a name to a river, / the place of the skunk, / the river of the wild onion smell, / Shee - caw - go."

2. *Aspects of free will.* The name was accepted. However, it is certain that the citizens at one time or another debated the good points and the bad of its spelling and pronunciation.

3. *Aspects of determinism.* If the garlic plant and the garlic smell had not been there the name would not have been occasioned; and if Indians who were not Illinois / Miami speakers had given the name because of the garlic smell, the name would have been in a different language or dialect. It would not have been *Chicago*, but another word. After all, the principal earmarks of a placename are its spelling and pronunciation. In case the

English, instead of the French, had first encountered *Chicago*, its present pronunciation would no doubt be different. It may well be wondered why this relatively uncouth name was not in the beginning ignored or changed. Let it be some consolation to the citizens of such places as Ashtabula, *Punxsutawney, Keokuk (yes, and even Chicago) to see that they owe their hometown names not so much to a free will as to the blindness of cause and effect – which left them no choice.

Conclusion

It can hardly be doubted that all things are caused. And, if we confine our thoughts about causation to the naming of places, the cause of a placename is the chain of preceding events without which the placename in question would not have occurred. . . . All the indispensable previous events would constitute the complete cause. Yet only a polymath, so it seems to me, could ever trace all the causes that have gone into the formulation of any one placename. Moreover, as our examples show, it requires rare judgment to select the correct immediate cause.

I feel that the realm of placenames is a good laboratory for the study of determinism. We have seen that every placename has two aspects – determinism and free will; and these aspects seem, though philosophically they are opposed to each other, to lead to identical conclusions. However, for a person committed to determinism, free will (since it is itself determined) is only a myth, a dream.

It is somewhat sad to have to conclude that the moving finger of ineluctable cause and effect is the ultimate author of all phenomena, even all placenames; and that acts of will are evidently determined too. Have we no power, then, to invent freely our placenames, to change them, to mold them nearer to the heart's desire? Alas, once adopted, they are almost as fixed as Gibraltar. But maybe we want them that way – the want being itself a cause.

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