Chapter 2: Alternatives and Emergent Facts

Following our arrival to 23 Congress Avenue, I immediately took note of several distinct characteristics of the property. The house sat in the center of a plot of short wild grass that had become patchy in the winter, causing round bare spots to be scattered throughout. The dwelling was a dilapidated structure possessing brick walls but a slanting roof that threatened to slip.

Detective Portsman went over to the front door and rapped sharply against it. A figure opened it ever so slightly, sticking a hand with gaudy jewelry into our view. I heard a rapid intake of breath as the door swung open, a tall woman standing there with her arms at her sides. She was young, perhaps twenty or twenty five years old with auburn hair and modest dress.

“How can I assist you today, officer?” she said, putting a hand against the doorframe.

“I am looking for a Montague Matin, if you have seen him.”

She rolled her eyes.

“My husband? I’ll get him down here. He’s always upstairs with his little inventions and ideas. If I didn’t love him so much…” she said, smiling as she shook her head. A few minutes later we faced a short mustached man with a high brow and a wrinkled jacket. He adjusted his glasses as he regarded Detective Portsman.

“I was informed you required my presence, sir?” he said innocently.

Detective Portsman’s eyes narrowed as he took down a note.

“Mr. Matin, have you ever dealt with a man named Mr. Freud Wilson?”

Montague bit his lower lip.

“Perhaps…”

“I expect that is a yes.”

“Yes.”

Detective Portsman sighed.

“Did you make a bet at his bucket shop regarding the fall of a certain stock?”

“A few, maybe.”

“Which stocks?”

“An overseas shipping company, U.S. Steel, and General Electric.”

Detective Portsman paused, gazing at the short man with a strange expression.

“Have you forgotten Ward & Clews?”

Montague traced a few letters into the air and muttered.

“No, I don’t think I have ever bet on that company.”

The detective removed the ledger from his jacket and put it into Montague’s hands. The man looked down at it before raising his head, showing shock on his face.

“Wait a moment, I did not write this! I swear I have never bet on Ward & Clews!”

“Then why is it apparent that you did, Mr. Matin?”

Montague bit his thumbnail, looking lost in thought.

“I am… not sure. But there must be a reasonable explanation…”

“If I may interject, Mr. Matin, do you happen to have any enemies who might have done such a thing?” Morris said, positioning himself towards the man.

“No. To be honest, I hardly leave the house. For the past few months I have been attempting to correct some of Tycho Brahe’s calculations for astral bodies. I believe sinusoidal

decomposition may contribute to some sort or minor epicycle or rotation that influences the exact ratio of the aphelion versus the perihelion."

Charles regarded him curiously.

"Fascinating. I suspect you are modeling minor deviations through the use of Fourier analysis or some adjacent method?"

Montague removed a rectangular cloth to wipe his glasses, suddenly peering at Morris with renewed interest.

"Of course! I think I am close to a breakthrough… just a month or two and perhaps I can send a draft to the-"

"I am sorry to bother you both, but we do have a slightly more serious matter at hand," Detective Portsman admonished, raising his hand at the two men. Morris quickly put both his hands on his cane.

"Naturally. I thought it could be beneficial to establish rapport with this gentleman."

"I suppose… but Mr. Matin should know that the crime he is being accused of has immensely grave implications."

Mr. Matin frowned.

"Excuse me? I believe I may have been left out of a considerable amount of context."

"Ahh, true. Mr. Freud Wilson was exposed as a criminal organizer, although there is some evidence suggesting there was an additional… benefactor who pulled his strings. The benefactor, whomever it may be, could very well have been involved in an entirely different case. This led to our discovery that the man may have left behind a way to reap a large sum for his troubles. Regretfully, this trail led to you, Mr. Matin."

Mr. Matin stood with a vacant expression on his face, tinged with concern.

"Good lord. What does this mean for me, exactly? Surely you will be able to clear my name?"

Detective Portsman stepped in.

"I shall send an officer to monitor your movements. The investigation will continue elsewhere, so I do have hope for your innocence."

Mr. Matin wringed his hands.

"Most worrying…"

We bid farewell to Montague and his wife, vacating the premises soon after. As we rode down the rough trail back to the station, I overheard Morris and Detective Portsman discussing what had just transpired.

"Your thoughts, detective?

"At the moment, very few. I believe that Mr. Matin had neither the cunning nor will to commit the crime. A mild, if eccentric man, he seemed completely harmless."

Morris laughed, making a violent hacking sound, like wood being split with a hatchet.

"If I recall correctly, you thought the same for Ms. Saxon. You should be very aware that looks can be deceiving. After all, did you not suspect I was a criminal when you first saw me? I must say your assessment was not entirely wrong, although I prefer the term 'justice on the fringe of lawfulness'."

I heard Detective Portsman exhale lightly.

"What of your own thoughts, Mr. Morris?"

“And here I thought you might never ask! The case is becoming both more and less outré. Do you not find it a bit conspicuous that both Ms. Saxon and Mr. Matin lacked the expected profile of a criminal in subsequent cases?”

“Naturally, but that hardly is an admission of guilt on his part.

“I agree, however it is a pattern I would be foolish to dismiss.”

There was silence from the two men for some time, the only noise being gravel shifting beneath the wheels of the automobile.

“I expect Mr. Matin’s name was not handwritten on the ledger? You never requested a handwriting sample, yet you also refrained from asking for their typewriter, which tells me one of two things: either Mr. Matin had several handwritten notes within view of the open door, or you perceived his hands with uncommonly developed interossei, indicating that he primarily wrote. Besides that, I could plainly perceive that Mr. Matin was perhaps not the most financially stable individual given the general location of his property and the poor caretaking of his lawn which I sensed underfoot. It suggests that he could not afford his own typewriter even if he wished to own one. Because of this, it seems possible that Mr. Matin’s order was a forgery intended to lead us off against him. But if it is, it is clumsy at best.”

The rest of the ride was permeated with an anticipation of things to come. Would Morris prove correct in his predictions? Soon, our vehicle came to a stop back at the station. We had hardly rolled to a halt when Detective Portsman began to muse aloud.

“Nevertheless, Mr. Matin is not similar to Ms. Saxon in the sense of means. Ms. Saxon had resources at her disposal, if only her jewelry, which allowed her to hire Evan Taylor as an assassin. Moreover, Ms. Saxon had the advantage of a nearly constantly absent family, aiding her in the entire case since she could adopt the Anna Carter persona much more easily. On the other hand, Mr. Matin is clearly someone who, for the most part, stays at home along with his wife. Even though it creates time for him to plot, I had no reason to think they had an unhealthy relationship nor would she not notice if he had suddenly left unchecked to coordinate criminal activities. Simply put, I do not see how Mr. Matin would have been willing to risk his position given the available information.”

Charles shrugged as he followed Detective Portsman to the entrance of the station, tapping the hard ground with an audible crunch.

“Certainly. But how often have we learned that things are never as they seem? I do think it was wise of you to place a sentry to be safe, however unlikely Mr. Matin’s involvement could be.”

Subsequent to this exchange, our ally was soon seated once again at his desk, his wrist against his forehead as he squinted his eyes. He lifted a ceramic mug to his lips and took a long drink of what may have been coffee, then replaced it on a coaster neighboring his notebook.

“I must say it’s very tiring to utilize your style of contemplation, Mr. Morris. Is it always so difficult to compare every alternative, or does it become easier?”

Morris made a noise akin to a cough.

“Oh, if only! It never gets any easier, but there is no substitute for counterfactual analysis. At the very least, I suppose you could consider sight a small consolation to assist you.”

“A moment, Mr. Morris, I mean no offense-”

Morris burst out laughing.

“It is quite alright, I am jesting.”

Detective Portsman exhaled, albeit with what I perceived to be less stress.

“Our procedure is at least well defined. If Mr. Wilson is the subject of attack then we could gather more information about the case one way or another. Analyzing his typewriters could also reveal useful evidence that can be used against him in court. I have already tried to bluff him to no avail, he seems adamant in the existence of some higher authority.”

Morris said nothing at first, gently massaging the metallic head of his cane.

“Time will tell… but if it does not, I fear we may need to be a bit more proactive.”

A few minutes of casual talk ensued, only to be rudely interrupted by a breathless man shoving open the door to the room

“Detective! Mr. Wilson’s been poisoned, sir. At first he complained about severe stomach cramps, but he collapsed in his cell.”

The detective paled and we rushed outside his office to find several men standing over a seemingly unconscious Mr. Wilson, who had apparently been removed from his cell. Detective Portsman knelt over the man, raising his eyelids and peering inside before leaning next to his mouth.

“Was Mr. Wilson exposed to alcohol?” he demanded, turning to the other officers.

“Yes, we found a wine bottle in his cell. It seems like it was a gift from his lawyer, but there was nothing solid in or on it, so we let it pass.”

“Damn it. It wasn’t wine, it was methanol. They are similar, but one is deadly if metabolized. Get him ethyl alcohol and take him to the hospital. Now!”

Mr. Wilson was withdrawn from the room, several men supporting him as he was lifted outside.

“It appears that you were correct, Mr. Morris. The circumstances surrounding him suggest that he was telling the truth about the benefactor.”

My companion shuffled his feet before snorting.

“It is one thing to ‘suggest’ and quite another to ‘be’. I will admit that this method is extremely clever. Something such as arsenic or a lethal opiate dosage very well could have been detected in a meal due to the difficulty in concealing its taste. Methanol is much trickier to notice as it shares both flavor and odor with typical spirits. He would have had no reason to suspect it, and disguising it as a gift during a tense time for him almost guarantees he would take a glass or two of it. It doesn’t take much to kill a man. Is it not interesting that the poison which he took happens to have a relatively simple treatment? Or that if this benefactor was as bright as we believed, he would not consider a trained toxicologist to detect the poison? The entire account is a trifle odd. There is another more likely alternative, such that Mr. Wilson forged the letters against him, but to silence him one of his own subordinates tried to assassinate him. This entire possibility is much more likely than a mysterious figure whom we have no real proof of existing. I would ordinarily play the devil’s advocate here, but it seems very contrived…”

The detective twiddled his fingers.

“You have a point. But I wonder where the methanol was retrieved from, although the process may require a deeper chemical analysis.”

With that, he strode down one of the branching hallways to what appeared to be a darkroom. He knocked carefully, provoking a man with overalls and thick glasses to exit.

“Hello, Mr. Simmons. It appears that I may require some potassium dichromate for testing.”

Very soon after, Mr. Simmons emerged from the room again, this time with a few squat bottles filled with a strange orange liquid. Detective Portsman pocketed one of the bottles and beckoned for us to follow him to his office. He rummaged through a tall metal cabinet and removed a Bunsen burner as well as a few glass phials.

He cautiously poured some of the tainted wine inside the burner, which eventually began to evaporate within the bottle, collecting a clear liquid in a separate chamber. Detective Portsman put a drop of the orange fluid inside the distillate, causing the liquid to violently change in hue. He brought the phial to his nose, his face warping in disgust.

“Formaldehyde. I would have expected at least some fruity odor if there was ethanol in the drink, although I doubt Mr. Wilson could tell the difference. This variety was either distilled or was purchased in a relatively high grade form from a pharmaceutical company.”

“There is a drugstore nearby, a successor of Mckinstry & Hyde. Perhaps they were purchased around here?”

Detective Portsman flipped open his notebook and tore out a page.

“I will make an order to get my men to investigate. In the meantime, I would like to take a look at those typewriters belonging to Mr. Wilson. I had them confiscated after our scuffle near the close of the *Rubedo* murders.”

He stepped over to one of the many cabinets within the room, taking a device out of it and placing it on one of the tables. It appeared to be a Remington brand typewriter as evidenced from its sleek sable design and stair step key pattern. Detective Portsman placed the ledger beside the typewriter before writing out text on a sheet of paper using the device. He raised both the documents to his eyes which darted between them in rapid succession. The detective removed a stained cotton strip from the typewriter and lightly dabbed it on the opposite side of the paper, prodding it with his fingers.

“It is almost certainly the same typewriter used to fabricate Mr. Matin’s signature. Notice the distinctive smudging that is consistent across both samples, specifically patching towards the upper curve of the ‘e’ and the left leg of the ‘m’. It may be a crucial detail when the evidence is presented against Mr. Wilson,” he said tactfully. “If by special circumstances the pharmacy has a discernible route back to him, we will have a formidable case against him.”

Soon after Detective Portsman conveyed his disquisition, Charles and I proceeded to his apartment, where we enjoyed a meal together as I continued *The Count Of Monte Cristo* aloud to him, much to his enjoyment. Unknown to us, the case developed in more ways than one, causing our recall after just a few days, something which I may credit to Detective Portsman’s efficiency. I hardly knew what to expect as we made our way back to the station.

The Third Excerpt

January 5th, 1917

I have always found the concept of Laplace’s demon to be an excellent thought experiment. If a man, or indeed, a demon, knew the exact position of, velocity of, and

interactivity of every particle, they could be able to predict the future. Not only the future, but also infer the past through retrograde reasoning. Some have taken this to be a mark against the idea of free will, a God-given right for those created in His image. I disagree, as I believe that the premise is invalid. Laplace's demon only functions if Newtonian physics apply on a microscopic level, if the true interactions between particles are a knowable thing.

However, I do think that there would be significant disorder on a microscopic level. Naturally, humans also possess an affinity for predicting other's actions or emotions. Humans are social creatures that normally navigate immensely complex social hierarchies and actively take into consideration dozens of variables when performing any action, even unconsciously. This implies that human behavior does possess an element of predictability.

If I remember correctly, Freud took a similar deterministic approach toward human development. He thought that humans were massively influenced by their childhood experiences which took to form their thoughts and reactions later on.

When connected to the field of neuroscience, it has some notable parallels. Phineas Gage was a man who survived a metal pole being shot through his skull in 1848, losing a portion of his brain, although he was lucky to be treated by a Doctor Harlow. A different man, Doctor John Eric Erichsen was kind enough to keep records of numerous workers who experienced traumatic head and spinal injuries. Over time, many of these men degenerated, but Phineas Gage lived despite his more serious injury. What was the difference between these cases? Mr. Gage possessed a rigorous schedule established by his stage driving which he practiced religiously. It suggests that the brain's connections may be able to adapt to changing circumstances even later in life. After years, he recovered much of his behavioral functions. Although I would prefer to have more samples, it seems to be that Freud's fatalism was incorrect. A man's mind may change over time given his surroundings. Charles Spearman released his research in 1904 on the nature of intelligence, which when elaborated on with some of his later research, suggests that children have a higher 'mental energy' to learn, adapt, and solve novel problems compared to older gentlemen, who appear to rely more on acquired knowledge.

If we may equate neurons to electric relays for a moment, it would seem likely that this 'mental energy' denotes a higher capability for interconnectedness in the brain, allowing for more efficient processing and sensory associations. Except… this process does not sustain its efficiency. Even though Phineas could perform normal cognitive functions, he certainly did not have enhanced cognition after his incident, although it did remain remarkably stable.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the mind is more soft and adaptable as a child, akin to putty or clay. As a person ages, it dries, retaining a general shape and internal structure but it is still somewhat flexible.

This leads to an additional question: what is the nature of human intellect? Or to be more specific, awareness of itself? The problem of consciousness has been one historically associated with abstract philosophy and not the physical sciences, and for good reason at that. As is the current scientific consensus, there is no unifying theory of consciousness based on the structure of the brain, making this question almost purely one of raw conjecture. We may still infer some details about what the conditions are that facilitates the emergence of consciousness.

For instance, if we use Phineas Gage once again, his actual consciousness was practically unaffected by severe damage to his cerebral cortex, although it resulted in personality changes. There was nothing that actually changed with respect to his awareness and higher order cognition. Seemingly, consciousness is exceptionally resilient and may require near total structural failure to eliminate.

But what is truly the cause of consciousness? It is self-evident that all humans believe themselves to be conscious and likely assume that those human beings around them are, in fact, also conscious. However, what makes a person presume this is the case? In all probability, it is due to other people exhibiting similar behavior to their own in several domains which I will elaborate further on. All functioning humans have the following traits: response to external stimuli, comprehension of sensory information, integration of said information into behavioral responses, synthesis of sensory information, and a capacity to solve problems with said synthesized data.

In 1913, Andry Markov wrote a compelling analysis on Eugene Onegin; predictive modeling of future words based on past patterns. Suppose I created a mechanical apparatus to analyze several documents in a similar manner and used them to create new valid sentences through a series of increasingly more complex comparisons of abstract information. The apparatus in question would be capable of practically all of the above behaviors characterized by consciousness except for comprehension. If true comprehension could be achieved, then what would separate the apparatus from a conscious entity?

In actuality, I believe that the only real difference between the two is in terms of declarative values. A typical machine must adhere to certain logical constraints and guidelines. However, even though a human has unconscious biological motivators to reproduce and seek sustenance, they do not behave in what would be considered to be in an optimal biological fashion. Humans almost always create their own set of values, which although having usage in a societal model of survival of the fittest, does not align with true biological aims. In other words, humans have a form of localized free will within the context of their own mechanisms.

But I would argue that this does not negate the significance of intellectual predictability. As I have stated, humans use highly accurate heuristics for social navigation, something which is undoubtedly facilitated by societal consistencies and expectations. Those bound by social norms and expectations are inherently predisposed to certain actions, which leaves its mark. Typical members of a society tend to operate in one of two ways, through logic or emotion.

In a way, emotion itself uses its own, severely skewed form of logic, such as the logic of reciprocity which has become a necessary part of any functioning group. Even though emotional logic is highly volatile, it tends to have recognizable end results. But… assuming a level of particulate consistency on a microscopic level would be fallacious. Who says a holistic structure has the characteristics of its components? Furthermore, Brownian motion would prevent accurate measurements on such a level. It complicates Pierre-Simon's demon on an exponential level.

But there is an additional complication which buries a hatchet in the demon's back. Bohr's atomic model in 1913 essentially had a clause for a specialized rule involving electrons, in the sense that they possess constant stationary orbits where they do not radiate energy. He makes the critical mistake of attempting to apply macroscopic physics to an entirely different domain. I suggest that there is no environmental rule at such a level, instead, electrons behave

in an entirely different way. What if they were never observable until they were observed? Or in other words, the method by which we interact with them interrupts their movements and localizes it as a particle? In that case, there are fewer complications as it behaves significantly more like a wave than a particle. It is a very interesting thought to investigate further when I have the time… but it could mean the death of the demon.

Even if our actions are truly entirely unpredictable, does that make our actions non-deterministic? Tell me, is a blind man whose actions are dictated by a flip of a coin he cannot perceive a man in possession of free will? He may not be predictable, but he has no more volition than a leaf in the wind. I reject Freud's determinism but does that mean I really have free will? If the answer is no, which I strongly suspect given that randomness does not equate to agency, then what purpose is there in the pursuit of what I find meaningful?

For example, under Darwinian evolutionary theory, humanity probably developed morality, not as a godly idiosyncrasy, but rather because nature would have it no other way.

"Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevails against him, two shall withstand him; a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Ecclesiastes is correct in more ways than one. Humanity could not have survived these ages, the ravages of time, without teamwork. Teamwork requires tolerance. Tolerance requires morality. Therefore morality is the rule for the success of man, not the exception. But if this is true then why exactly must I be bound by this proclivity? The maturation of the human race is none of my concern. If I must be frank, I have no reason to value morality. If morality was a tool used for the survival of the entire race and I have no reason to care about it, then I should have no reason to engage with it. Why should I feel limited because of a mindlessly passed down trait? It is illogical.

Then I may address perhaps the most important question in this entry: for what purpose may I use my life then? I do not have free will nor do I have a concrete moral beacon. I am virtually purposeless… unless to appease my whims. I do not draw fulfillment from very much in life besides the pursuit of knowledge, which is worthless without a receptacle, and extinguishing boredom. It is a blight upon my life. All my knowledge amassed, wisdom acquired, costs paid, and for nothing. I can only use my knowledge to pursue more knowledge. When considered critically, it is a repetitive and bitter assignment to be tasked with.

Due to this, an extreme ennui grasps me as I go about my daily arrangements. It makes me positively ill. Sometimes I feel like Sisyphus, forever being damned to roll a boulder up a hill. Like a husk crawling from day to day in the hot sun. I look for any kind of solace but I am greeted by nothing except accidie. I do not have very strong emotions regarding much in my life, but if I could attribute hatred to one thing, it would be this despicable feeling. A void persists in my heart, a choking smog that occasionally persuades me to the cusp of madness. But I refuse to give in. Why should I seek asylum or end my life? I must live, no matter the cost. As to why… maybe what Freud referenced through a life instinct. But then… Why should I live? I must have a purpose… which in this case must align with my values. If I have none, then what do I exist for? The only thing I find fulfilling… thrill. Or to be more specific, a particular intellectual branch of it. Is it not more exciting to scheme outside the law? There is something strangely exhilarating about successfully executing a plan or stratagem. It is odd… yet highly suggestive of intrinsic facts.

I cannot function properly without some sort of stimulus. Academia does not fill me anymore, so I must take more drastic actions… perhaps establish myself as… a benefactor, if you will. But I have my doubts. Am I a rational man? Or am I masking myself beneath the facade of logic?

By dint of Detective Portsman's efforts, it was discovered that the pure methanol used in the attempt to murder Mr. Wilson was actually purchased by one of his own men, who produced a paper detailing the orders as requested by Mr. Wilson himself after being confronted. For better or for worse, Mr. Wilson made a full recovery after the 'attack', being returned back to his holding cell. The detective led us directly to where the man in question was being held, a bare barred room resembling not much more than a concrete graying box.

Mr. Wilson sat with an upturned brow as we entered the room, only to transform his face into a scowl. He was dressed in a much shabbier uniform than last I had seen him despite him having been keeled over at that point.

"Ah! Mr. Kaufmann, I presume?" Morris asked, facing the cell with a grin. "It has been some time since I have had the pleasure of meeting you face to face."

Mr. Wilson spat at the ground, turning to Detective Portsman.

"Is this some sort of cruel joke?" he said sardonically. "To taunt me before my trial? Did you even try to find out who attempted to kill me?"

Detective Portsman held a professional tone.

"Mr. Wilson… there is no need to avoid the problem. It was found that you had ordered the attack on yourself. The handwriting is your own, passed down to one of your own men. I have produced a facsimile-"

Mr. Wilson interjected by roughly snatching the small piece of paper from the detective's hand, scanning it furtively as his eyes widened.

"No, it is impossible. I never gave this order. I must-"

"I know you did it, Mr. Wilson. There is no need to maintain this facade."

Mr. Wilson became increasingly more agitated, running his fingers across his head.

"No! You don't understand. I am a dead man walking. You have no idea who you are dealing with. The devil himself could hardly compete with that- that-"

Detective Portsman put his hand against the bars of the cell, looking directly at the wretched man's face.

"That benefactor of yours? Just admit it, Mr. Wilson, he never existed."

Mr. Wilson slumped against the back wall of his cell, his eyes unfocusing.

"You don't believe me… I wish that inhuman never existed. That temperamental, cunning-"

"Enough. I tried to elicit a confession, but your nonsense tells me you will not have it."

Mr. Wilson clenched his fists in anger but quickly released that tension, opting for a dejected look and a face full of acrimony.

Detective Portsman seemed somewhat disappointed as he left the room, beckoning toward Charles and I. As I left the room I noticed that Charles was lingering next to the cell.

"...Morris?"

Charles cocked his head to the side, allowing some light from a nearby bulb to cause a strange twinkling effect across the lenses of his glasses.

“I have some business to attend to with Mr. Wilson. I apologize for the inconvenience, I will be outside very soon.”

I knew immediately from his expression that Morris was up to something. Of course, I have never been skilled at assessing what precisely he may have been doing, but I knew better than to question him, and so I closed the door to the corridor, leaving myself with Detective Portsman. He regarded me curiously but said nothing. Nearly half an hour later, Morris finally emerged from the corridor with a satisfied smirk on his face.

“Just a moment, Bill. I need to inform our good friend of some developments.”

At that point, Morris and Detective Portsman whispered to each other, accompanied by several gestures. They appeared to come to an agreement, finally allowing Charles to approach me once again. He reached out his arm, which I took in mine.

“It seems we may have yet another possible escapade on the horizon, would you be so obliged as to join me?”

“Certainly, Charles.”

“Perfect! Let us have lunch first, we will discuss the details in the afternoon,” he said, walking out the front door alongside me.

“There is much to do.”