READING 26

The System of Human Freedom

Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach

Paul-Henri Thiry (the French rendering of his original German name, Paul Heinrich Dietrich), Baron d'Holbach, was born in 1723 in Edesheim, Germany. At the age of 12, Thiry was taken to Paris to be brought up by his uncle, Franciscus Adam d'Holbach. His uncle, who had made a fortune in Paris and had become a French citizen, carefully directed his education. In 1744 Thiry enrolled in the University of Leiden in Holland. He returned to France five years later and became a naturalized citizen. When his uncle died in 1753, Thiry inherited his fortune and his title, Baron d'Holbach. Holbach's home became a gathering place for many prominent French thinkers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert. His foreign acquaintances included David Hume, Adam Smith, and Benjamin Franklin. Holbach was an atheist, a materialist, and a severe critic of religion, absolute monarchy, and feudalism. To avoid the personal danger that would result from being known as the proponent of such views, Holbach had his books published in Holland under a false name and then had them smuggled back into France. He died in Paris in 1789.

Holbach's major works are *Christianity Unveiled; Being an Examination of the Principles and Effects of Christianity* (1761), *The System of Nature; or, Laws of the Moral and Physical World* (1770), and *Common Sense; or, Natural Ideas Opposed to Supernatural* (1772).

Our selection is from Part I, Chapter 11, of *The System of Nature*, entitled "The System of Human Freedom." Holbach argues that human beings are wholly physical entities and therefore wholly subject to the laws of nature. We have a will (which Holbach views as a modification of the brain), but our will is not free because it necessarily seeks our well-being and self-preservation. Forces independent of us create various desires in us. In any situation, we always act in accordance with our strongest desire—namely, the desire for what we think is most advantageous to us. To use one of Holbach's examples, suppose I am extremely thirsty and come upon a fountain of water but know that the water is poisoned. If I refrain from drinking, it is because of the strength of my desire to avoid being poisoned; if I drink, it is because my present desire for water overpowers the foreseen harm from the poison. Whether I drink or refrain from drinking, my action "is equally necessary; it is the effect of the motive that is more powerful and acts more strongly on the will."

In the latter part of our reading, Holbach responds to several arguments commonly raised by defenders of free will. For example, some argue that we must be free because we deliberate among alternatives. Holbach responds that deliberation is simply the process of stopping to calculate which alternative would be most advantageous. Others try to demonstrate their freedom by performing a simple action such as moving their hand. Holbach replies that the moving of their hand is simply the necessary result of their desire to prove that they are free. Holbach concludes that every human action, just like every other occurrence in nature, "is a necessary consequence of causes, visible or concealed, that are forced to act according to their proper natures."

[INTRODUCTION]

. . . Human beings are [wholly] physical entities. However one considers them, they are bound to universal nature and are subject to the necessary and immutable laws that nature imposes on all the beings it includes, according to the peculiar essence or properties it gives each being, without consulting them. Our life is a line that nature commands us to trace on the face of the earth, and we can never deviate from this line, even for a moment. We are born without our assent, our organization does not depend on us, our ideas come to us involuntarily, our habits are in the power of those who cause us to acquire them, and we are continually changed by causes, both visible and hidden, that necessarily regulate the way we exist, think, and act. We are good or bad, happy or unhappy, wise or foolish, reasonable or unreasonable, without our will having anything to do with these different states. Yet, despite the shackles that constantly bind us, we claim that we are free—that we determine our actions and destiny, independently of the causes that move us. . . .

[THE MECHANISM OF DETERMINISM]

If it is our actual essence to tend to our well-being and to seek self-preservation; if all the movements of our human machine follow necessarily from this primitive impulse; if pain turns us aside from what we should avoid; if pleasure tells us what we should seek; then it is our essence to love what causes agreeable sensations or leads us to expect them, and to hate what causes the opposite sensations or leads us fear that they will occur. We are necessarily attracted, and our will is necessarily determined, by objects we judge useful; and we are necessarily repelled by objects we judge harmful to our permanent or momentary way of existing. It is only by the aid of experience that we acquire the ability to know what we should love or fear. Are our organs sound? If so, our experiences will be true; we will have reason, prudence, and foresight; we will anticipate effects that lie in the distant future; and we will know that sometimes what we judge to be good can become bad through its necessary or probable consequences, and that what we know to be momentarily bad can by its results attain for us a solid and lasting good. Thus it is experience that enables us to know that the amputation of a limb will cause a painful sensation; and therefore we necessarily fear this operation and want to avoid the pain. But if experience has shown us that the momentary pain caused by the operation can save our life, then, since we cherish our preservation, we necessarily submit to this momentary pain in light of the good that outweighs it.

The will . . . is a modification of the brain that disposes the brain to action or prepares it to put into play the organs that it can move. This will is necessarily determined by the good or bad, agreeable or disagreeable, qualities of the object or of the motive that acts on our senses, or the idea of it that remains with us and is supplied by our memory. Consequently, we act necessarily; our action is the result of the impulse that we have received from the motive, the object, or the idea that has modified our brain or disposed our will. When we do not act on this

impulse, it is because some new cause, motive, or idea occurs, which modifies our brain in a different manner, gives it a new impulse, a new will—and the will either acts according to this new impulse or it suspends action. Thus, the sight of an agreeable object, or the idea of it, determines our will to action in order to attain this object. But a new object or a new idea can destroy the effect of the initial one and prevent us from acting to attain the object. This is how reflection, experience, and reason necessarily stop or suspend the actions of our will; otherwise our will would necessarily follow the initial impulses that began carrying it toward a desirable object. In all this, we always act according to necessary laws.

[ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS]

When I am tormented by a strong thirst and create an idea of, or actually perceive, a fountain whose pure waters can quench my thirst, am I master of desiring or not desiring the object that can satisfy such an acute need in my present state? Undoubtedly everyone would agree that is impossible for me not to want to satisfy my thirst. But someone will say, "If someone tells you at that moment that the water you desire is poisoned, you will abstain from drinking it, despite your thirst." And this person would falsely conclude that this shows that I am free. In fact, however, just as thirst necessarily was determining me to drink before I knew that the water had been poisoned, in the same way, this new discovery necessarily determines me not to drink. The desire for self-preservation destroyed or suspended the initial impulse that thirst was imparting to my will. The second motive became stronger than the first; the fear of death necessarily outweighed the painful sensation caused by thirst. "But," someone will say, "if the thirst is very strong, an imprudent person would risk drinking the poisoned water, without regard for the danger." In this case the initial impulse will prevail and will necessarily make the person act, since it will be stronger than the later impulse. Nevertheless, in each case—drinking the water or not drinking it—the action is equally necessary; it is the effect of the motive that is more powerful and acts more strongly on the will.

This example can serve to explain all the phenomena of the will. This will, or rather the brain, is like a ball that, although it has received an impulse that drives it in a straight line, is moved off course as soon as a force greater than the initial one makes it change direction. The person who drinks water that he has been told is poisoned seems to be insane; but the actions of the insane are as necessary as those of the most prudent individuals. The motives that determine the hedonist and the sensualist to risk their health are as powerful, and resulting actions are as necessary, as those that determine wise persons to manage their actions. "But," one will insist, "the sensualist can be led to change his conduct." But this does not mean that he is free; it means only that there are motives sufficiently powerful to destroy the effect of those that previously acted on him. These new motives determine his will to his new conduct as necessarily as the previous motives determined his previous conduct.

We are said to *deliberate* when the action of the will is suspended. This happens when two opposite motives act alternately on us. To deliberate is to love

and hate alternately—to be successively attracted and repelled, to be moved sometimes by one motive and sometimes by another. We deliberate only when we do not sufficiently understand the quality of the objects that move us, or when experience has not sufficiently taught us the effects, more or less distant, that our actions will have on us. I want to go outside to get some fresh air, but the weather is uncertain; hence I deliberate, weighing the various motives that press alternately on my will, to go out or not to go out. In the end I am determined by the most probable motive, which takes me from indecision and necessarily draws my will either to go outside or to remain inside. This motive is always the present or future advantage that I find in the action I decide to take.

Our will is often suspended between two objects, the presence or the ideas of which move us alternately. Before acting, we wait until we have contemplated the objects, or the ideas they have left in our brain, that call us to different actions. We then compare these objects or these ideas. But even when we are deliberating, comparing the alternatives of love and hate that follow each other (sometimes with extreme rapidity), we are not free for a single moment; for the good or the evil that we find successively in the objects are the necessitating motives of these momentary acts of the will, these rapid movements of love and fear, that we experience as long as our uncertainty continues. From this it is obvious that deliberation is necessary, that uncertainty is necessary, and that whatever choice we make after deliberation will always necessarily be the one that we have judged, rightly or wrongly, to be probably the most advantageous to us. . . .

Choice in no way proves human freedom. A person deliberates only when he does not yet know which object to choose, among the many that move him; he is then in a quandary that does not end that until his will is determined by idea of the greatest advantage that he believes he will find in the object he chooses or the action he undertakes. So we see that his choice is necessary, because he would not decide on an object or an action unless he believed that he would find some advantage in it. For a person to act freely, he would have to be able to will or choose his motives, or to prevent those motives from acting on his will. Since action is always the effect of our will once is it determined, and since our will can be determined only by a motive that is not in our power, it follows that we are never the master of the determinations of our own will, and that consequently we never act freely. Some have believed that we are free because we have a will and the power to choose, but these people have paid attention to the fact that our will is moved by causes independent of us. . . .

Some have believed that human beings are free, because they imagine that the soul can at will call to mind ideas that sometimes suffice to curb the most passionate desires. Thus, the idea of a distant evil sometimes prevents us from yielding to a present and actual good: A remembrance (which is an imperceptible, slight modification of our brain) destroys at each moment the real objects that act on our will. But we are not master of recalling our ideas at will: These ideas associate independently of us; they are arranged in our brain without our knowledge and despite us, making an impression more or less profound. Our memory itself depends on our organization, and its fidelity depends on the habitual or momentary state in which we find ourselves. When our will is

strongly determined to some object or idea that rouses a very lively passion in us, those objects or ideas that would be able to stop our action disappear from our mind. We shut our eyes to the present dangers that threaten us, the ideas of which should restrain us. We march forward headlong toward the object that draws us. Reflection has no effect on us, and we see nothing but the object of our desires. The salutary ideas that would be able to stop us are no longer present, or they become present too weakly or too late to prevent us from acting. Such is the case with all those who, blinded by some strong passion, are not in a state to recall to themselves those motives, the ideas of which would alone would be able to restrain them. The trouble they are in prevents them from judging sanely, from foreseeing the consequences of their actions, from applying their experience, and from using their reason. But these operations suppose a soundness in the manner of associating ideas, and the brain of these people can no more do this, because of the momentary delirium it suffers, than their hand can write when they are doing vigorous exercise.

Our ways of thinking are necessarily determined by our ways of being; they therefore depend on our natural organization and the modification that our machine receives independently of our will. From this we are forced to conclude that our thoughts, our reflections, and the ways we see, feel, judge, and combine ideas are neither voluntary nor free. In short, our soul is master neither of the movements excited in it, nor of representing to itself the images or ideas that would be needed to counterbalance the impulses it receives. This is why we cease to reason when we are in passion: It is as impossible to hear reason, at that time, as when we are in ecstasy or drunk. The wicked are never more than people drunk or delirious; if they reason, it is only when tranquillity is reestablished in their machine, and then the tardy ideas that present themselves to their mind allow them to see the consequence of their actions—and this brings on them the disturbance we call *shame, regret, remorse*. . . .

In short, the actions of human beings are never free; their actions are always the necessary consequence of their temperament, their received ideas, their true or false notions of happiness, and their opinions strengthened by example, education, and daily experience. We see so many crimes in the world only because everything conspires to make human beings vicious and criminal: their religions, their governments, their education, and the examples they see—all these drive them irresistibly to evil. In such cases, morality preaches virtue to them in vain; for virtue would be simply a painful sacrifice of happiness in societies where crimes are continually crowned, esteemed, and rewarded, and where the most hideous disorders are punished only when those who commit them are too weak to have the right to do so with impunity. Such societies punish members of the lower classes for very excesses that they respect in members of the upper classes; and they often have the injustice to sentence to death those were made criminal by the public prejudices that they themselves uphold.

A human being, therefore, is not free at any moment in his life; he is necessarily guided at each step by the advantages—real or fictitious—that he attaches to the objects that rouse his passions. These passions are necessary in a being that tends constantly toward happiness. The energy of these

passions is necessary, because it depends on his temperament; a human being's temperament is necessary, because it depends on the physical elements that enter into his composition; the modifications of his temperament are necessary, because they are the infallible and inevitable consequences of the way that physical and moral beings continually act on him.

Despite these clear proofs of the lack of human freedom, some may still insist that this freedom exists. Someone will tell us that if he proposes to move or not to move his hand (actions in the category called "indifferent"),[1] he evidently appears to be master of his choice, and this proves that he is free. My reply is that this example of a person performing an action that he resolves to perform does not prove his freedom: His desire to exhibit his freedom, roused by the dispute, has become a necessary motive that decides his will for moving or not moving his hand. What misleads him, or persuades him that he is free in this case, is that he does not discern the true motive that causes him to act—namely, the desire to convince me. If in the heat of the dispute he insists and asks, "Am I not the master of throwing myself out the window?," I will say no and tell him that, as long as he preserves his reason, there is no probability that the desire to prove to me his freedom will become a motive sufficiently strong to cause him to sacrifice his own life. If my adversary, despite this, would throw himself out the window in order to prove to me that he is free, I would not conclude that he acted freely in doing this, but that the strong force of his temperament led him to this folly. Insanity is a state that is based on the heat of the blood, not on the will. Fanatics and heroes face death as necessarily as cowards flee from it. . . .

CONCLUSION

When we say that a human being is not free, we are not comparing him to a body whose motion is caused by a simple impulse: He contains in himself causes inherent to his existence, and he is moved by an internal organ that has its own laws and is necessarily determined by ideas, by perceptions, and by sensations received from external objects. We do not know the mechanism of these sensations and perceptions or the way ideas are imprinted on our brain, because we cannot discern all these movements, or perceive the chain of operations in our soul, or perceive the motive[2] principle that acts in us. We therefore suppose that this motive principle is free. "Motive principle" means, literally, something that moves itself, that determines itself without a cause—or rather, a term that signifies that we do not know how or why it acts as it does. It is true that people say that the soul has an activity proper to itself, and I agree. But it is certain that this activity would never take place unless some motive or cause put it in a condition to act. At least no one will claim the soul can love or hate without having been moved, without knowing the objects, or without having some idea of the qualities of these objects. Gunpowder undoubtedly has an activity proper to

[1] *"indifferent":* neither morally good nor morally evil. [D. C. ABEL]
[2] *motive:* causing motion. [D. C. ABEL]

itself, but this activity will never take place unless someone applies fire to it, which forces it to act.

It is the great complexity of our movements, the variety of our actions, and the multiplicity of causes that move us (whether simultaneously or successively without interruption) that persuade us that we are free. If all the movements of human beings were simple, if the causes that move us were distinct and not intermingled, and if our machine were less complicated, we would see that all our actions are necessary because we could go back at once to the cause that made us act. . . .

It is, then, because we do not go back to the causes that move us, and because we are unable to analyze and disentangle the complicated movements that occur in us, that we think we are free. It is only because of our ignorance that we have the deep, though illusory, feeling that we are free, and take this feeling as a striking proof of this supposed freedom. If only each person were willing to examine his own actions, and search out his true motives and discover how they are connected, he would remain convinced that the feeling that he has about his own freedom is a mental fabrication that experience must quickly destroy. . . .

From all that has been said in this chapter, it follows that no human being is free at any time during his existence. He is not master of his formation, for this comes from nature. He is not master of his ideas or the modifications of his brain, for these result from causes that, despite himself and without his knowledge, continually act on him. He is not master of loving or desiring what he finds lovable or desirable. He is not master of deliberating in situations in which he is uncertain of the effects that objects will produce on him. He is not master of choosing what he believes to be the most advantageous. He is not master of acting otherwise than he does at the moment when his will is determined by his choice. . . .

In both the physical world and the moral world, everything that happens is a necessary consequence of causes, visible or concealed, that are forced to act according to their proper natures. In a human being, [what we call] freedom is simply necessity contained inside himself.

READING 27

The Dilemma of Determinism

William James

William James was born in New York City in 1842. As a youth he attended schools in England, France, Switzerland, and Germany. He also learned a great deal from his father (an energetic and unconventional scholar) and from extensive reading. He was interested in both science and art and decided to become a painter. When he was eighteen, he began to study painting, but soon realized that he did not have the talent to become a great artist. The following year he enrolled in the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University. In 1864 James transferred to the medical school. He took time out from his studies to accompany naturalist Louis Agassiz on a trip to the Amazon River. He later spent time studying experimental physiology in Germany. James received his medical degree from Harvard in 1869. He had long been in poor health, and he spent the next few years as a semi-invalid at his father's house. In 1873 he began teaching physiology at Harvard. Two years later he began teaching psychology, and four years after that he started teaching philosophy. Except for a two-year period spent recovering from serious illness, he continued teaching at Harvard until his retirement in 1907. James died in 1910 in Chocorua, New Hampshire.

James's principal works are *Principles of Psychology* (1890), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909).

Our reading is from "The Dilemma of Determinism," a lecture James gave in 1884 to students of the Harvard Divinity School. *Determinism,* James explains, is the doctrine that everything happening in the future is already completely predetermined by the way things are now: "Those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be." *Indeterminism,* by contrast, allows some "loose play" among the parts of the universe, so that the future holds more than one possibility. According to determinism, the only future that is possible is the one that actually happens; whatever happens, happens by necessity. According to indeterminism, alternative futures are possible; things could have happened differently from the way they did.

James contends that our decision whether to accept determinism or indeterminism will be based on our "postulates of rationality"—whether we think the world is more rational if it is governed by necessity or if it contains multiple possibilities. Determinists are people who think that if chance has a role in the world (that is, if some events are not the product of necessity), the world becomes chaotic and unintelligible. James maintains, however, that an event that happens by chance is just as intelligible as one that happens by necessity. James goes on to argue that the existence of "judgments of regret" (judgments that something should have been or should now be otherwise than it was or now is) makes indeterminism more plausible than determinism. If determinists admit the rationality of judgments of regret, they commit themselves to the pessimistic view that the world, with all its evils, could not be better than it is. If they want to be optimistic, they have to view all judgments of regret as irrational. The only way out of this dilemma is to accept indeterminism.

[INTRODUCTION]

. . . A common opinion prevails that the juice has ages ago been pressed out of the free will controversy, and that no new champion can do more than warm up stale arguments which everyone has heard. This is a radical mistake. I know of no subject less worn out, or in which inventive genius has a better chance of breaking open new ground—not, perhaps, of forcing a conclusion or of coercing assent, but of deepening our consciousness of *what* the issue between the two parties really is, our sense of what hidden implications the ideas of fate and of free will contain. . . .

To begin, then, I must suppose [that] you [are] acquainted with all the usual arguments on the subject. I cannot stop to take up the arguments from causation, from statistics, from the certainty with which we can foretell each other's conduct, from the fixity of character, and all the rest. But there are two *words* which encumber these classical arguments usually, and which we must immediately dispose of, if we are to make any progress. One is the eulogistic word *freedom*, and the other is the opprobrious word *chance*. The word "chance" I wish to keep, but I wish to get rid of the word "freedom." Its eulogistic associations have so far overshadowed all the rest of its meaning that both parties claim the sole right to use it, and determinists today insist that they alone are freedom's champions. Old-fashioned determinism was what we may call *hard* determinism. It did not shrink from such words as fatality, bondage of the will, necessitation, and the like. Nowadays we have a *soft* determinism[1] which abhors harsh words, and, repudiating fatality, necessity, and even determinism, says that its real name is freedom; for freedom is only necessity understood, and bondage to the highest is identical with true freedom. . . .

[DETERMINISM AND INDETERMINISM]

Now, this is all a quagmire of evasion under which the real issue of fact has got entirely smothered up. Freedom in all these senses presents simply no problem at all. No matter what the soft determinist means by it—whether he means acting without external constraint, whether he means acting rightly, or whether he means acquiescing in the law of the whole—who cannot answer him that sometimes we are free and sometimes we are not? But there *is* a problem, an issue of fact and not of words, an issue of the most momentous importance, which is often decided without discussion in one sentence, nay, in one clause of a sentence, by those very writers who spin out whole chapters in their efforts to show what "true" freedom is; and that is the question of determinism, about which we are to talk tonight.

Fortunately, no ambiguities hang about this word or about its opposite, indeterminism. Both designate an outward way in which things may happen,

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[1] *soft determinism:* the view that although all actions are determined by preceding causes, actions determined by certain kinds of *internal* causes are free and we are morally responsible for these actions. As James explains, he calls this form of determinism "soft" because it backs away from the harsh implications of determinism as ordinarily understood. The harsh implications of ordinary ("hard") determinism include the denial of free will and moral responsibility. [D. C. ABEL]

and their cold and mathematical sound has no sentimental associations that can bribe our partiality either way in advance. Now, evidence of an external kind to decide between determinism and indeterminism is . . . strictly impossible to find. Let us look at the difference between them and see for ourselves. What does determinism profess?

It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: The part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning.

> With Earth's first Clay They did the Last Man knead,
> And there of the Last Harvest sow'd the Seed:
> And the first Morning of Creation wrote
> What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read.[2]

Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on each other, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous. Of two alternative futures we now conceive, both now may be really possible; and the one only become impossible at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself. Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbroken, unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things. To that view, actualities seem to float in a wider sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and, *somewhere,* indeterminism says such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth.

Determinism, on the contrary, says they exist *nowhere,* and that necessity on the one hand and impossibility on the other are the sole categories of truth. Possibilities that fail to get realized are, for determinism, pure illusions: They never were possibilities at all. There is nothing inchoate, it says, about this universe of ours; all that was or is or shall be actual in it, having been from eternity necessarily and virtually there. The cloud of alternatives [that] our minds escort this mass of actuality withal[3] is a cloud of sheer deceptions, to which "impossibilities" is the only name that rightfully belongs.

The issue, it will be seen, is a perfectly sharp one, which no eulogistic terminology can smear over or wipe out. The truth *must* lie with one side or the other, and its lying with one side makes the other false.

The question relates solely to the existence of possibilities, in the strict sense of the term, as things that *may,* but *need* not, be. Both sides admit that a volition, for instance, has occurred. The indeterminists say another volition might have

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[2]Omar Khayyám, *Rubáiyát,* trans. Edward Fitzgerald, Stanza 79. Omar Khayyám (about 1048–1122) was a Persian poet and astronomer. [D. C. ABEL]

[3]*withal:* with. [D. C. ABEL]

occurred in its place; the determinists swear that nothing could possibly have occurred in its place. Now can *science* be called in to tell us which of these two point-blank contradictors of each other is right? Science professes to draw no conclusions but such as are based on matters of fact, things that have actually happened. But how can any amount of assurance that anything actually happened give us the least grain of information as to whether another thing might or might not have happened in its place? Facts can only prove facts. With things that are possibilities and not facts, they have no concern. If we have no other evidence than the evidence of existing facts, the possibility-question must remain a mystery never to be cleared up.

And the truth is that facts practically have hardly anything to do with making us either determinists or indeterminists. Sure enough, we make a flourish of quoting facts this way or that; and, if we are determinists, we talk about the infallibility with which we can predict each other's conduct, while, if we are indeterminists, we lay great stress on the fact that it is just because we cannot foretell each other's conduct, either in war or statecraft or in any of the great and small intrigues and businesses of men, that life is so intensely anxious and hazardous a game. But who does not see the wretched insufficiency of this so-called objective testimony on both sides? What fills up the gaps in our minds is something not objective, not external. What divides us into possibility men and anti-possibility men is different faiths or postulates—postulates of rationality. To this man the world seems more rational with possibilities in it, to that man more rational with possibilities excluded. And talk as we will about having to yield to evidence, what makes us monists or pluralists,[4] determinists or indeterminists, is at bottom always some sentiment like this.

[DETERMINISM AND CHANCE]

The stronghold of the deterministic sentiment is the antipathy to the idea of chance. As soon as we begin to talk indeterminism to our friends, we find a number of them shaking their heads. This notion of alternative possibility, they say, this admission that any one of several things may come to pass, is, after all, only a roundabout name for *chance;* and chance is something the notion of which no sane mind can for an instant tolerate in the world. What is it, they ask, but barefaced crazy unreason, the negation of intelligibility and law? And, if the slightest particle of it exist anywhere, what is to prevent the whole fabric from falling together, the stars from going out, and chaos from recommencing her topsy-turvy reign?

Remarks of this sort about chance are apt to put an end to discussion about as quickly as anything one can find. I told you a short while ago that "chance" was a word I wished to keep and use. Let us then examine exactly what it means, and see whether it ought to be such a terrible bugbear to us. I fancy that squeezing the thistle boldly will rob it of its sting.

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[4]*Monists* hold that there is just one kind of ultimate reality; *pluralists* hold that there is more than one kind of ultimate reality. [D. C. ABEL]

The sting of the word "chance" seems to lie in the assumption that it means something positive, and that, if anything happens by chance, it must needs[5] be something of an intrinsically irrational and preposterous sort. Now, chance means nothing of the kind. It is a purely negative and relative term, giving us no information about that of which it is predicated, except that it happens to be disconnected with something else—not controlled, secured, or necessitated by other things in advance of its own actual presence. As this point is the most subtle point of the whole lecture, and at the same time the point on which all the rest hinges, I want to beg you to pay special attention to it. What I say is that it tells us nothing about what a thing may be in itself to call it chance. It may be a bad thing, it may be a good thing. It may be lucidity, transparency, fitness incarnate, matching the whole system of other things, when it has once befallen, in an unimaginably perfect way. All you mean by calling it chance is that this is not *guaranteed*, that it may also fall out otherwise. For the system of other things has no positive hold on the chance thing. Its origin is in a certain fashion negative: It escapes, and says "Hands off!"—coming, when it comes, as a free gift or not at all. . . .

Nevertheless, many people talk as if the minutest dose of disconnectedness of one part with another, the smallest modicum of independence, the faintest tremor of ambiguity about the future, for example, would ruin everything, and turn this goodly universe into a sort of insane sand-heap or nulliverse, no universe at all. Since future human volitions are as a matter of fact the only ambiguous things we are tempted to believe in, let us stop for a moment to make ourselves sure whether their independent and accidental character need be fraught with such direful consequences to the universe as these.

What is meant by saying that my choice of which way to walk home after the lecture is ambiguous and matter of chance as far as the present moment is concerned? It means that both Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street are called; but that only one, and that one *either* one, shall be chosen.[6] Now, I ask you seriously to suppose that this ambiguity of my choice is real and then to make the impossible hypothesis that the choice is made twice over, and each time falls on a different street. In other words, imagine that I first walk through Divinity Avenue, and then imagine that the powers governing the universe annihilate ten minutes of time with all that it contained, and set me back at the door of this hall just as I was before the choice was made. Imagine then that, everything else being the same, I now make a different choice and traverse Oxford Street. You, as passive spectators, look on and see the two alternative universes—one of them with me walking through Divinity Avenue in it, the other with the same me walking through Oxford Street. Now if you are determinists you believe one of these universes to have been from eternity impossible: You believe it to have been impossible because of the intrinsic irrationality or accidentality somewhere involved in it. But, looking outwardly at these universes,

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[5]*needs:* necessarily. [D. C. ABEL]

[6]James's terms "called" and "chosen" allude to the saying of Jesus, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). [D. C. ABEL]

can you say which is the impossible and accidental one, and which the rational and necessary one? I doubt if the most ironclad determinist among you could have the slightest glimmer of light on this point. In other words, either universe *after the fact* and once there would, to our means of observation and understanding, appear just as rational as the other. There would be absolutely no criterion by which we might judge one necessary and the other matter of chance. Suppose now we relieve the gods of their hypothetical task and assume my choice, once made, to be made forever. I go through Divinity Avenue for good and all. If, as good determinists, you now begin to affirm, what all good determinists punctually do affirm, that in the nature of things I *couldn't* have gone through Oxford Street—had I done so it would have been chance, irrationality, insanity, a horrid gap in nature—I simply call your attention to this, that your affirmation is what the Germans call a *Machtspruch*,[7] a mere conception fulminated as a dogma and based on no insight into details. Before my choice, either street seemed as natural to you as to me. Had I happened to take Oxford Street, Divinity Avenue would have figured in your philosophy as the gap in nature, and you would have so proclaimed it with the best of deterministic consciences.

But what a hollow outcry, then, is this against a chance which, if it were present to us, we could by no sensible[8] empirical character whatever distinguish from a rational necessity. . . .

And this at last brings us within sight of our subject. We have seen what determinism means: We have seen that indeterminism is rightly described as meaning chance; and we have seen that chance, the very name of which we are urged to shrink from, as from a metaphysical[9] pestilence, means only the negative fact that no one part of the world can claim to control absolutely the destinies of the whole. But although, in discussing the word "chance," I may at moments have seemed to be arguing for its real existence, I have not meant to do so yet. We have not yet ascertained whether this *is* a world of chance or not. At most, we have agreed that it *seems* so. And I now repeat what I said at the outset, that from any strict theoretical point of view the question is insoluble. To deepen our theoretic sense of the *difference* between a world with chances in it and a deterministic world is the most I can hope to do. And this I may now at last begin upon, after all our tedious clearing of the way.

[IMPLICATIONS OF DETERMINISM]

I wish first of all to show you just what the notion that this is a deterministic world implies. The implications I call your attention to are all bound up with the fact that it is a world in which we constantly have to make what I shall, with your permission, call judgments of regret. Hardly an hour passes in which we

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[7]*Machtspruch:* an authoritative decree (literally, in German, "power saying"). [D. C. ABEL]
[8]*sensible:* able to be sensed. [D. C. ABEL]
[9]*metaphysical:* relating to *metaphysics*, the study of the nature and kinds of reality. [D. C. ABEL]

do not wish that something might be otherwise; and happy indeed are those of us whose hearts have never echoed the wish of Omar Khayyám,

> That we might clasp ere closed the Book of Fate,
> And make The Writer on a fairer leaf
> Inscribe our names, or quite obliterate! . . .
>
> Ah Love! could you and I with Fate conspire
> To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
> Would we not shatter it to bits—and then
> Remold it nearer to the Heart's Desire![10]

Now it is undeniable that most of these regrets are foolish and quite on a par in point of philosophic value with the criticisms on the universe of that friend of our infancy, the hero of the fable "The Atheist and the Acorn"—

> Fool! had that bough a pumpkin bore,
> Thy whimsies would have worked no more (and so on).[11]

Even from the point of view of our own ends, we should probably make a botch of remodeling the universe. How much more then from the point of view of ends we cannot see! Wise men therefore regret as little as they can. But still some regrets are pretty obstinate and hard to stifle—regrets for acts of wanton cruelty or treachery, for example, whether performed by others or by ourselves. Hardly anyone can remain *entirely* optimistic after reading the confession of the murderer at Brockton the other day—how, to get rid of the wife whose continued existence bored him, he inveigled her into a desert[12] spot, shot her four times, and then, as she lay on the ground and said to him "You didn't do it on purpose, did you, dear?," replied "No, I didn't do it on purpose" as he raised a rock and smashed her skull. Such an occurrence, with the mild sentence and self-satisfaction of the prisoner, is a field for a crop of regrets, which one need not take up in detail. We feel that, although a perfect mechanical fit to the rest of the universe, it is a bad *moral* fit, and that something else would *really* have been better in its place.

Now for the deterministic philosophy, the murder, the sentence, and the prisoner's optimism were all necessary from eternity; and nothing else for a moment had a ghost of a chance of being put into their place. To admit such a chance, the determinists tell us, would be to make a suicide of reason, so we must steel our hearts against the thought. And here our plot thickens, for we see the first of those difficult implications of determinism and monism which it is my purpose to make you feel. If this Brockton murder was called for by the rest of the universe, if it had to come at its preappointed hour, and if nothing else would have been consistent with the sense of the whole, what are we to think of the universe? Are we stubbornly to stick to our judgment of regret, and say, though it *couldn't* be, yet it *would* have been a better universe with something

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[10]Omar Khayyám, *Rubáiyát*, Stanza 106, lines 2–4; Stanza 108. [D. C. ABEL]

[11]Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, "The Atheist and the Acorn." Finch (1661–1720) was an English poet. [D. C. ABEL]

[12]*desert:* desolate. [D. C. ABEL]

different from this Brockton murder in it? That, of course, seems the natural and spontaneous thing for us to do. And yet it is nothing short of deliberately espousing a kind of pessimism. The judgment of regret calls the murder bad. Calling a thing bad means, if it means anything at all, that the thing ought *not to be,* that something else ought to be in its stead. Determinism, in denying that anything else *can* be in its stead, virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible—in other words, as an organism whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irremediable flaw. . . . Regret for the murder must transform itself, if we are determinists and wise, into a larger regret. It is absurd to regret the murder alone. Other things being what they are, *it* could not be different. What we should regret is that whole frame of things of which the murder is one member. I see no escape whatever from this pessimistic conclusion, if, being determinists, our judgment of regret is to be allowed to stand at all.

The only deterministic escape from pessimism is *everywhere* to abandon the judgment of regret. That this can be done, history shows to be not impossible. The devil, *quoad existentiam,*[13] may be good. That is, although he be a *principle* of evil, yet the universe with such a principle in it may practically be a better universe than it could have been without. On every hand, in a small way, we find that a certain amount of evil is a condition by which a higher form of good is bought. There is nothing to prevent anybody from generalizing this view, and trusting that if we could but see things in the largest of all ways, even such matters as this Brockton murder would appear to be paid for by the uses that follow in their train. An optimism *quand même,*[14] a systematic and infatuated optimism like that ridiculed by Voltaire[15] in his *Candide,* is one of the possible ideal ways in which a man may train himself to look on life. Bereft of dogmatic hardness and lit up with the expression of a tender and pathetic hope, such an optimism has been the grace of some of the most religious characters that ever lived.

> Throb thine with Nature's throbbing breast,
> And all is clear from east to west.[16]

Even cruelty and treachery may be among the absolutely blessed fruits of time, and to quarrel with any of their details may be blasphemy. The only real blasphemy, in short, may be that pessimistic temper of the soul which lets it take pleasure in such things as regrets, remorse, and grief.

Thus, our deterministic pessimism may become a deterministic optimism at the price of extinguishing our judgments of regret.

But does not this immediately bring us into a curious logical predicament? Our determinism leads us to call our judgments of regret wrong, because they are pessimistic in implying that what is impossible yet ought to be. But how then about the judgments of regret themselves? If they are

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[13]*quoad existentiam:* (Latin) as far as existence is concerned. [D. C. ABEL]

[14]*quand même:* (French) despite all this. [D. C. ABEL]

[15]Francois-Marie Aroute de Voltaire (1694–1778) was a French writer. [D. C. ABEL]

[16]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Threnody," lines 207–208. Emerson (1803–1882) was an American essayist and poet. [D. C. ABEL]

wrong, other judgments—judgments of approval presumably—ought to be in their place. But, as they are necessitated, nothing else *can* be in their place; and the universe is just what it was before—namely, a place in which what ought to be appears impossible. We have got one foot out of the pessimistic bog, but the other one sinks all the deeper. We have rescued our actions from the bonds of evil, but our judgments are now held fast. When murders and treacheries cease to be sins, regrets are errors. The theoretic and the active life thus play a kind of see-saw with each other on the ground of evil. The rise of either sends the other down. Murder and treachery can't be good without regret being bad; regret can't be good without treachery and murder being bad. Both, however, are supposed to have been foredoomed, so *something* must be bad in the world. It must be a place of which either sin or error forms a necessary part. . . .

[CONCLUSION]

. . . The only consistent way of representing . . . a world whose parts may affect each other through their conduct being either good or bad is the indeterministic way. What interest, zest, or excitement can there be in achieving the right way, unless we are enabled to feel that the wrong way is also a possible and a natural way—nay, more, a menacing and an imminent way? And what sense can there be in condemning ourselves for taking the wrong way, unless we need have done nothing of the sort, unless the right way was open to us as well? I cannot understand the willingness to act, no matter how we feel, without the belief that acts are really good and bad. I cannot understand the belief that an act is bad, without regret at its happening. I cannot understand regret without the admission of real, genuine possibilities in the world. Only *then* is it other than a mockery to feel, after we have failed to do our best, that an irreparable opportunity is gone from the universe, the loss of which it must forever after mourn. . . .

The world is enigmatical enough in all conscience, whatever theory we may take up toward it. The indeterminism I defend, the free will theory of popular sense based on the judgment of regret, represents that world as vulnerable and liable to be injured by certain of its parts if they act wrong. And it represents their acting wrong as a matter of possibility or accident, neither inevitable nor yet to be infallibly warded off. In all this, it is a theory devoid either of transparency or of stability. It gives us a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene; and, to a mind possessed of the love of unity at any cost, it will, no doubt, remain forever inacceptable. A friend with such a mind once told me that the thought of my universe made him sick, like the sight of the horrible motion of a mass of maggots in their carrion bed.

But while I freely admit that the pluralism and the restlessness are repugnant and irrational in a certain way, I find that every alternative to them is irrational in a deeper way. The indeterminism with its maggots, if you please to speak so about it, offends only the native absolutism of my intellect—an absolutism which, after all, perhaps, deserves to be snubbed and kept in

check. But the determinism with its necessary carrion, to continue the figure of speech, and with no possible maggots to eat the latter up, violates my sense of moral reality through and through. When, for example, I imagine such carrion as the Brockton murder, I cannot conceive it as an act by which the universe as a Whole logically and necessarily expresses its nature, without shrinking from complicity with such a Whole. And I deliberately refuse to keep on terms of loyalty with the universe by saying blankly that the murder, since it does flow from the nature of the Whole, is *not* carrion. There are *some* instinctive reactions that I, for one, will not tamper with. . . .

Make as great an uproar about chance as you please, I know that chance means pluralism and nothing more. If some of the members of the pluralism are bad, the philosophy of pluralism, whatever broad views it may deny me, permits me, at least, to turn to the other members with a clean breast of affection and an unsophisticated moral sense. And if I still wish to think of the world as a totality, it lets me feel that a world with a *chance* in it of being altogether good, even if the chance never come to pass, is better than a world with no such chance at all. That "chance" whose very notion I am exhorted and conjured to banish from my view of the future as the suicide of reason concerning it, that chance is—what? Just this—the chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been. This is the only chance we have any motive for supposing to exist. Shame, rather, on its repudiation and its denial! For its presence is the salt that keeps the world sweet, the air that fills its lungs.