

[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* determinism¹ 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,

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 withal³ 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

²Omar 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.

⁴Monists 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 needs⁵ 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,

⁵*needs*: necessarily. [D. C. ABEL]

⁶James'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 sensible⁸ 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 metaphysical⁹ 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.

[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 unacceptable. 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.