

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* 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]