

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.

[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

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]