The Idea of Freedom in the Philosophy of William James

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THE IDEA OF FREEDOM IN THE PHILOSOPHY
OF WILLIAM JAMES

by
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the Requirements for the Degree of
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The historical development of a notion is characterized by a progressive accumulation of relevant data gathering around the core notion itself. To each succeeding moment in this process accrues new knowledge contributed by the labors of those who undertake the task of attempting to determine the meaning of the notion involved. Each new moment in the process either adds to or subtracts from the already established set of attributes which characterize the notion. The process is additive if the notion is discovered to have hitherto unrealized attributes as parts of its meaning. The process is subtractive if attributes already contained in the accepted meaning of the notion are discovered to be accidentally and not essentially related to it. Now, the ultimate meaning ascribed to a notion is more a function of the investigator's basic assumptions than the mere accumulation of observed facts. Basic assumptions are starting points from which conclusions are reached. What is true in one system with its own set of basic assumptions can be false in another system with different basic
assumptions. Since different principles or starting points lead to different conclusions, the latter must be understood in terms of the former. Thus, different and even diametrically opposed conclusions about the same subject become significant and explicable in terms of different basic assumptions.

Of the many notions which have confronted philosophical speculation and received radically different interpretations, the notion of human freedom occupies a fundamental place in the history of philosophical thought. Time-honored indeed is the notion of human freedom. Its continual presence in philosophical dialogue testifies to the attention and interest accorded it by human thought. Presently, however, our inquiry does not propose to trace the historical development of this notion. Rather, our inquiry will attempt to illuminate but one of the historical moments in the development of this notion at which it finds expression in the philosophy of William James.

James's thought exhibits a complex structure which is due in some degree to the fact that he was both psychologist and philosopher. A more fundamental source of the complexity of his thought resides in the fact that James's mind was uncommonly receptive and even sympathetic to a rather wide and divergent range of notions. Such an attitude enabled James to increase the body of his thought by receiving contributions from various and often diverse sources. Although not himself
the originator of Pragmatism,¹ James's name is most often associated with it. Pragmatism, which is not a philosophical system but rather a method for dealing with otherwise insoluble philosophical problems, was given its most popular elaboration in James's works. On the basis of James's pragmatism, notions find their worth and candidacy for acceptance as meaningful categories of human thinking in proportion to their ability to fit into satisfactory relations with one's other stock of ideas which are derived from one's experiences in the world. Moreover, such ideas are counted as true inasmuch as they possess consequences for future action. In short, ideas find their meaning in relation to the life situation.

Since the aim of our inquiry is to elucidate the meaning of the notion of human freedom as it appears in James's thought, any definition at this point would be premature and assume evidence which can be sufficiently examined only later. Indeed, prior to exhibiting the meaning of human freedom we must establish the ground of the possibility of human freedom in James's thought. In a preliminary way, however, we have already encountered the criterion according to which notions are evaluated on the basis of the pragmatic method. We may expect

¹To Charles Sanders Peirce belongs the title of "the originator of Pragmatism." Peirce later changed the name of his doctrine to Pragmaticism to avoid confusion with the popular exposition of pragmatism which stressed too much of the practical or utilitarian aspects of the doctrine.
then, that the answer to the question as to the meaning of freedom in James's thought will somehow derive its meaning in relation to the life situation.

As a consequence of the fact that James was both psychologist and philosopher the question of human freedom involves both psychological and philosophical aspects. Our inquiry will approach the question from this dual aspect. First, in Chapter II, James's theory of consciousness will be examined in order to provide the basis for an understanding of his theory of volition. Second, in Chapter III, the various elements from which James's theory of volition is constructed will be examined. Third, in Chapter IV, the philosophical aspects of the question will be examined along with certain observations about the kind of universe in which human freedom is a meaningful notion to James. Lastly, in Chapter V, a difficulty concerning James's notion of agency in action and its relation to human freedom will be noted. The method of approach employed in previous chapters involved the mere presentation of James's views on both the psychological and philosophical aspects of the question without any attempt to provide an evaluation. Hence, criticism at this point is conspicuous in comparison to its absence in previous chapters. However, since this difficulty underlies both the psychological and philosophical aspects of freedom, we have reserved comment until both aspects have been examined.
The notion of agency in action is of such fundamental importance to freedom that any explanation of freedom that fails to provide the effective means of its own exercise lives in an atmosphere of existential neutrality, and, as such, is incapable of providing an adequate account of freedom as a lived experience.

In this final chapter, we shall explore the nature of this difficulty. Then, on the basis of everything that has been said, we shall attempt to state the essential meaning of human freedom in the philosophy of William James.
CHAPTER II

JAMES'S THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The examination of the psychological aspects of James's notion of freedom will confine itself to what James has said regarding this notion. No attempt will be made to evaluate his views as a psychological theory of volition. This is not the task of this inquiry. What is pertinent here is the elucidation of the psychological counterpart of James's total view of freedom. By examining the psychological aspects of this notion, we hope to enhance our understanding of its philosophical meaning in James's thought.

Now, our resolution to avoid an appraisal of James's view as a psychological theory of volition should not be construed as a license to neglect any of its psychological aspects. The lack of either positive or negative criticism implies neither agreement nor disagreement. Such a procedure merely serves as a precautionary measure in order to avoid becoming too deeply involved in purely psychological problems. Needless to say, however, it is impossible to present the psycho-aspects of James's theory of volition without at the same time entering into at least an examination of those elements of consciousness which are relevant to James's theory of volition. Such a
limited consideration is at best a quite inadequate and incomplete glance at his notion of consciousness, but a thorough examination of this notion would involve a separate study itself. What is required to achieve the aim of this inquiry is that those elements which constitute the background against which, and even according to which, the phenomenon of volition occurs be properly elucidated. These elements will then be assigned their respective places in James's theory of volition.

Since consciousness is the sphere in which volition occurs the nature of consciousness becomes of paramount importance to volitional activity. The fundamental principle to be grasped in understanding the Jamesian notion of consciousness is the principle that consciousness is of its very nature impulsive. "The first point to start from in understanding voluntary action, and the possible occurrence of it with no fiat or express resolve, is the fact that consciousness is in its very nature impulsive." 2 This principle of ideo-motor action asserts that whatever idea has dominant possession of the focal point of consciousness is the idea which will be automatically translated into action. Whenever an idea in the mind immediately begets its own peculiar kind of bodily movement without hesitation, ideo-motor action is operative. In such instances there is no lag between the conception and the

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2 William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York, 1890), II. 526.
execution. For James, such action is the prototype of all volitional action.

Now, in order to understand this principle an examination of the following topics seems to be in order: (a) the conception of consciousness as a stream; (b) consciousness conceived as a complex continuum; (c) consciousness as being of one kind, namely, reflex action. This method follows the division already made in another work, on James's will theory. Each of these aspects will be examined with a view to establishing their relation to volition.

A. The Stream of Consciousness

On the notion of consciousness James observes that it is a fundamental fact. "The first and foremost concrete fact which everyone will affirm to belong to his inner experience is the fact that consciousness of some sort goes on. 'States of mind succeed each other in him.' If we could say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains,' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that thought goes on." In such a characterization of consciousness the various states are related to each other in such a way that one experiences a mental unity, one continuous mental flow.

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4 William James, Psychology, Briefer Course (New York, 1892) p. 152.
These states of consciousness are found to be naturally related to each other, for they are but various moments of the same continuous flow. However, these various states of mind are in no way discrete. Each antecedent state surrenders its entire content to its consequent state in such a way that there is no gap between the various states. Each consequent state appropriates the entire content of all that precedes as its proper heritage. In his characterization of consciousness, James insists that one should not conceive it after the manner of a chain or train, but rather, after the manner of a river or stream. "Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows."\(^5\) In order to understand what James means one might employ a less accurate but perhaps none the less helpful characterization in which consciousness is likened to the notion of a snow ball as it rolls along in the snow. In such a comparison one can imagine the gathering mass of the snow ball as it moves along. Now, so long as it possesses motion it is continually gathering everything in its path. In this sense consciousness is continually flowing and growing. Granted the motion of consciousness, such a process will be seen to be interminable. The obvious difference between the snow in the present example and thought in the case

\(^5\) James, *Principles*, I, 239.
of consciousness is the fact that the former refers to a homogeneous content while the latter does not. In any event, the principle involved is the same. Whether it be the rolling of the snow ball or the flowing of consciousness, there are no gaps or discrete moments. In consciousness there is only the continuous flow and assimilation of experiences. Such a process constitutes both the nature and content of consciousness.

In order to buttress further his conception of consciousness as a stream, James observes that the very structure of the nervous system speaks for the aptness of such a characterization. The structure of the nervous system is conducive to the triadic movement in which all activity is involved. The incoming currents bearing messages from the external world are conducted to the central nervous system where they are interpreted and excite activity in the proper outgoing currents. However, this aspect will be considered in connection with reflex action and consciousness.

The characterization of consciousness as a stream is not itself sufficient to provide a complete picture of the phenomenon involved. Not only is consciousness involved in a continuous flow but it is also involved in continuous change. The experience of novelty with the passage of each moment of the flow is an undeniable fact. As the flow moves forward each and every moment discovers a new and different world existing on the horizon of sense experience. Thus, experience is
constantly remoulding consciousness. No two moments are ever the same. Each brain state is modified by each new experience. However, this does not mean to imply that one can never experience the same thing twice. Such an interpretation would be a flagrant violation of everyday experience in which the same things are encountered and recognized. What James means is that the total conscious experience could never be exactly the same. For so long as consciousness moves forward after the manner of a stream each new experience modifies the existing totality of past experiences. And until all the possible experiences are possessed there can be no real totality, for so long as life and consciousness continue each successive moment adds something new. The only totality possible would be when consciousness has come to an end, i.e., when no further experience is possible. But this is possible only when the individual has become insensible to the world.

To clarify his meaning on this subject James employs the analogy of the ocean. Considering the numberless waves with their crests rising on the surface of the ocean, one might well imagine the likelihood of two such crests occupying the same point in space at different times. This in no way seems unlikely. But what seems impossible is that the same totality of waves with their crests and hollows occupying exactly the
same place should ever occur twice. All of this amounts to saying that the stream of consciousness is in no way reversible. Each antecedent state completely succumbs to its consequent state and yields its entire content so perfectly that a cross section of any given moment of the stream would contain the whole psychic history of the owner's past life. Each mental state is a sort of mental microfilm of the enormous array of past events. Every brain state is partly determined by the nature of this entire past succession. Alter the latter in any part, and the brain-state must be somewhat different. Each present brain-state is a record in which the eye of Omniscience might read all the foregone history of its owner.

Thus, these various aspects of consciousness, the fact that it is continuous, continually changing, and personal, constitute one of the fundamental facts of consciousness: it is a stream.

B. Consciousness as a Complex Continuum

As consciousness moves along after the manner of a stream, the manifold of sense experience is constantly being incorporated into its content. The result of this incorporation is that consciousness is constructed from really diverse elements.

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6 Ibid., p. 225.

7 Ibid., p. 234.
Everyday experience will testify to this fact. Almost everyone has had the experience of trying to recall a forgotten name or trying to solve a problem that demands the ability to evaluate various methods in approaching the problem. Names or methods are accepted or rejected on the basis of their relation to the idea possessing attention at the moment. Any variety of ideas may come to mind while attention is focused on a specific object. Yet all the while the mind is engaged in a process of selecting or rejecting various ideas on the basis of their relation to the primary object. It is even true that some ideas never reach the state of being accepted or rejected at all, but just remain in the background ready to be called if needed. At any given time the ideas actually in the conscious field are few, but beneath this field is a large reservoir of ideas ready to be tapped at a moment's notice.

One may acquire a visual image of this phenomenon by observing the area of his own visual field. Suppose, for example, that one is seated behind a desk looking across the room at the door through which a friend at this very moment is entering. Although the eyes become fixed on the figure of the friend, the image does not exist in a visual vacuum. On the contrary, the image of the friend is only part of a larger image. The image of the friend is surrounded by a fringe of objects which are present but are not the primary object of attention. Such objects are the door, wall, desk, and so forth.
Now, as these objects extend to the periphery of the visual field, they become less and less distinct to the viewer. For the moment at least, the image of the friend occupies the center of attention and the rest of the objects in the background are irrelevant.

Consciousness as James conceives it, may be likened to this example. It is composed of concentric rings or layers. In the focal point there is that upon which attention is fixed. In the second layer are impressions which are present but do not divert attention from the object under consideration. And lastly, at the outermost reaches of consciousness is a third layer which might be called the fringe layer. Given James's characterization of consciousness as a stream it seems quite natural that it is constituted as a complex. For as consciousness flows forward it gathers and assimilates sense impressions which are themselves different. Hence, the contents of consciousness are as diverse as the objects which abound in the world of experience.

Since the manifold of experience does not contain impressions of equal interest there must be some way of sorting these various impressions and assigning them their respective levels of consciousness. Such a task is accomplished by the selectivity of consciousness. Attention determines which impressions will occupy the focal point. Attention will become the subject of investigation later. Suffice it to say at present
that attention determines what idea will occupy the focal point. What is of special interest at present is the interrelation among the various layers of consciousness. How do these layers interact with each other? Traditional psychology, according to James, has gone astray on this point:

The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows around it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead.

Ideas, then, as they occupy consciousness, are always immersed in a wider sea of relations. Nothing comes before the mind in the pure state unattended by its living associates. And the various elements within the continuum react in such a way as to stimulate and modify action.

C. Consciousness as Reflex Action

The final aspect to be noted about James's notion of consciousness is its relation to the type of activity known as reflex action. This doctrine asserts that a stimulus impinging on a sensory receptor initiates an impulse which traverses the afferent process to a mediating body and then along the

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8James, *Briefer Course*, pp. 165-166.
efferent process until it terminates in action.

In considering reflex action as one of the aspects of consciousness one is confronted with what is perhaps the most perplexing problem of James's whole psychology: the problem of the mind-body relationship. Although this problem pervades the whole of James's psychology, it is most strikingly emphasized in connection with reflex action. Simply stated, the problem is concerned with the nature of the relationship between thought process and neural process. It will satisfy the needs of the present inquiry if this problem merely be noted without attempting to provide an analysis of the elements involved.

James's indifference to the psychical or physiological level of explanation employed in accounting for various kinds of action is the source of a great deal of confusion. For instance, when speaking of the interaction between ideas in which the presence of one idea may interfere with another, James seems to situate the discussion on the purely physiological level. And then as if to further clarify everything already said, James summarizes the discussion in the following way: "A waking man's behavior is thus at all times the resultant of two opposing neural forces." 9 Such a statement leaves one in doubt as to which explanation James means to

9James, Principles, II, 527.
convey. James confesses his own doubt on this matter in another passage. "I cannot see how such a thing as consciousness can possibly be produced by a nervous machinery." 10

Again, when discussing the immortality of the soul, James begs his listeners "to agree with me today in subscribing to the great psycho-physiological formula: Thought is the function of the brain." 11 Little doubt could remain, it seems, after this sort of unequivocal statement about the nature of thought. In spite of the materialistic ring of this formula, James avoids a purely materialistic conclusion by suggesting that the brain has a transmissive and not a productive function. 12

Admittedly, it is quite tempting in the light of the foregoing statement to classify James's interpretation of consciousness as nothing but reflex action. Yet there is evidence that James himself was unsettled about this matter. And this evidence was seen in relation to James's explanation of activity on the psychical or physiological level with no adequate distinction between these levels. To classify James as


12 Ibid., p. 15.
belonging to the nothing but class would seem, then, to be somewhat hasty, since his view was incomplete and unfinished.

In fact, James was fully aware of the difficulty of the mind-body relationship. But the difficulty as he conceived it could not be settled on psychological grounds. To James, the science of psychology was in a state similar to what physics was before Galileo, or what chemistry was before Lavoisier. Further, psychology as a science, thought James, must aim at a causal explanation and not remain satisfied with a mere des­criptive account. And the subject matter for such a science should be the mind-body relationship. Since, however, psychology had not advanced far enough to provide precise answers to certain questions regarding the exact nature of this relationship, the psychologist must work with the facts at his disposal. Thus it seems that James felt at liberty to speak with indifference of either the physiological or psychical causes of action, while being fully aware that both were involved as causal factors and that the science of the future must take both into account in its explanation of human action.

Perhaps a consideration of the close connection between reflex action and the automaton theory will serve to clarify somewhat the problem as it appeared to James. Briefly stated,

13Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, II, 119.
the automaton theory holds that behavior is entirely determined
by sense impressions which pass from the stimulated nerve end-
ings through the central nervous system and out again through
the musculature. Furthermore, in such a conception conscious-
ness is present, but is inefficacious. Now the inefficacy of
consciousness is precisely what James does not allow. In 1879
there appeared an article entitled "Are We Automata?" in which
James attacked this theory on the basis of its denial of the
efficacy of consciousness. The gist of his argument centers
around his claim that the cerebrum is distinguished from the
spinal cord by its instability and indeterminateness of ac-
tion. It is potentially capable of a great diversity of ac-
tions. If it is not to be simply a sphere of disordered events
subject to the varying demands of impinging stimuli, guidance
is needed. The possession of guidance allows it to meet the
demands of a changing world in some orderly fashion. Now con-
sciousness is found to be characterized on every level by dis-
 crimination and choice. 14 Further, since consciousness has
evolved it may be assumed to be useful. Hence, in conscious-
ness there is found both the affirmation and expression of the
organism's interest, an interest which determines brain activ-
ity according to its needs. The meaning herein contained is

14 William James, "Are We Automata?" Mind, IV (January,
1879), 13.
that the higher centers have intelligibility only in terms of purposes or ends, for "teleology is an exclusively conscious function." 15

Thus, the brain is conceived as the organizer of the organism's experiences. And these experiences are seen to possess meaning when they are interpreted in terms of the organism's needs. The same sort of argument appears in "Reflex Action and Theism," in which James insists that the acceptance of the doctrine of reflex action commits one to the view that the mind is an essentially teleological mechanism.

I mean by this that the conceiving or theorizing faculty -- the mind's middle department -- functions exclusively for the sake of ends that do not exist at all in the world of impressions we receive by way of our senses, but are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity altogether. It is a transformer of the world of our impressions into a totally different world, -- the world of our conception; and the transformation is effected in the interests of our volitional nature, and for no other purpose whatsoever. Destroy the volitional nature, the definite subjective purposes, preferences, fondnesses, and not the slightest motive would remain for the brute order of our experience to be remodelled at all.

Thus, the contribution of consciousness on the conceptual level is the transformation of brute experiences for the sake of ends. Rather than agreeing with the automaton theory that consciousness is merely epiphenomenal and lacking in efficacy, James

15 Ibid., 7.
considers it as interacting with the physical and thereby possessing its own kind of efficacy. James's view of the mind-body relation would therefore rest on the principle of interactionism. To James's mind, thought is for the sake of action. Consciousness does not merely supervene, it intervenes.

For James, however, the rejection of the automaton theory did not necessarily involve the rejection of the doctrine of reflex action. And this is so because reflex action can be interpreted on the basis of either the automaton or interactionist theory. The latter interpretation is the one decided on by James. However, the exact relationship between the physiological and psychical spheres still remains a mystery.

Such, then, is the final aspect to be considered about consciousness, that it is a phase of the type of all action, namely, reflex action.

The consideration of these three aspects of consciousness was undertaken in order to throw some light on the principle that consciousness is in its very nature impulsive. That is to say, the principle that states whatever idea is in possession of the focal point of consciousness will automatically pass over into action. And this was seen to be true because consciousness flows after the manner of a stream. And as it flows forth it gathers a multitude of diverse sense impressions, thereby constituting it as a complex continuum. Lastly, since it is a stage in the reflex arc, consciousness mediates between
incoming and outgoing currents. In this role as a mediating agency consciousness modifies behavior. Now, all these aspects taken together constitute the dynamic structure of consciousness. Thus, consciousness can be described as being in its very nature impulsive.
CHAPTER III

JAMES'S THEORY OF VOLITION

Our examination of the basic structure of consciousness, that it is a stream, a complex continuum, and of one kind, namely, reflex action, was undertaken for the purpose of illuminating James's theory of volition. But the foregoing account of the mechanisms involved in consciousness hardly seem to describe operations on the volitional level. Surely James does not mean to explain volition in this way. On the contrary, the principle of ideo-motor action "obeys the type of all conscious action, and from it one must start to explain the sort of action in which a special fiat is involved."17 And this is especially true with regard to the doctrine of reflex action.

All our deeds were considered by the early psychologists to be due to a peculiar faculty called the will, without whose fiat action could not occur. Thoughts and impressions, being intrinsically inactive, were supposed to produce conduct only through the intermediation of this superior agent. Until they twitched its coattails,

17James, Briefer Course, p. 427.
so to speak, no outward behavior could occur. This doctrine was long ago exploded by the discovery of the phenomena of reflex action, in which sensible impressions, as you know, produce movement immediately and of themselves. The doctrine may also be considered exploded as far as ideas go.

The relevance of the foregoing considerations should now be evident. Such considerations are fundamental to an understanding of James's theory of volition.

Nevertheless, such a characterization would seem to ignore the essential aspect of any theory of volition. And the essential aspect of any theory of volition is that aspect which provides an answer to the question why one idea rather than another occupies the focal point of consciousness. The answer to this question will be found in the examination of James's notion of decision and its various divisions. The need for decision arises as a consequence of the complication of consciousness by more than one idea seeking to monopolize the focal point. The resolution of this struggle can be accomplished in either one of two ways: the opposing ideas are allowed to struggle until one is victorious and therefore terminates in action, or, if the struggle admits of no solution, an additional force is brought to bear in order to settle the deadlock. According to James, the former kind of decision requires consent; the latter requires effort.

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18James, Talks, p. 170.
The moments of decision in which one is called upon to utter the voluntary fiat have been analyzed by James into five general types. The first type of decision is what James calls the reasonable type. The arguments for and against a certain action are settled and one adopts one of the alternatives. In such cases, "we seem to ourselves almost passive, and the 'reasons' which decide us appear to flow from the nature of things, and to owe nothing to our will. We have, however, a perfect sense of being free, in that we are devoid of any feeling of coercion." 19 In the second type determination comes from without, and the feeling is that "we might as well stand by this course as by the other." 20 In the third type the accidental determination comes from within and one acts almost automatically. In the fourth type of decision deliberation is terminated by the fact that the whole scale of values is shifted "in consequence of some outer experience or some inexplicable inward change." 21

In the fifth type of decision one may feel that all the evidence is in and that the scale has been balanced, but "we feel, in deciding, as if we ourselves by our own wilful act

19 James, *Briefer Course*, p. 430.
20 Ibid., p. 431.
21 Ibid., p. 432.
inclined the beam . . . The slow dead heave of the will that is felt in these instances makes them a class altogether different subjectively from all four preceding classes." 22
It is in this fifth and final type of decision that one experiences the feeling of effort.

Now, within the framework of these five types of decision lies the answer to the question of which idea enjoys possession of the focal point of consciousness. In other words, these five types of decision are at the bottom of the Jamesian theory of volition.

The first four types of decision may be included under the general heading of the volition of consent, while the fifth type requires its own special classification, since it requires an additional force to achieve its goal. This additional force is experienced as the feeling of effort. This last type will be called the volition of effort. Our method follows a division already made in another work on James' will theory. 23

The volition of consent will be found to rest on the principle of association, while the volition of effort will be found to rest on the notion of attention. It becomes necessary, then, to examine each of these with a view to

22 James, Briefer Course, pp. 432-433.
23 See above, p. 9, n. 3.
establishing their relation to the volitional life. We shall examine (a) the notion of association and its relation to the volition of consent; and (b) the notion of attention and its relation to the volition of effort.

A. Association and Consent

On the topic of association James observes that there is a fundamental dependence of thought on the associative machinery: "There are, then, mechanical conditions on which thought depends, and which, to say the least, determine the order in which is presented the content or material for her comparisons, selections, and decisions."²⁴ In the present context the various parts of the content of consciousness are being considered with regard to how they act and influence each other. In this respect, the notion of associates enters the discussion of consent.

In his discussion of association James's intention is to show "that there is no other elementary causal law of association than the law of neural habit. All the materials of our thought are due to the way in which one elementary process of the cerebral hemispheres tends to excite whatever other elementary process it may have excited at some former time. The number of elementary processes at work, however, and the nature of those which at any time are fully effective in

²⁴James, Principles, I, 553.
rousing the others, determine the character of the total brain-action; and, as a consequence of this, they determine the object thought of at the time." 25

But a difficulty immediately arises as a result of such a description. For it is no doubt obvious that almost every neural process has, at one time or another, been connected with various other neural processes. Hence, which neural process is to be awakened by a given process involves a problem. For example, suppose a given process A has been associated in the past with both processes B and C. Now, upon the occurrence of process A which associate, process C or B, is to be awakened? Something more than the basic law between elementary brain processes is required to answer this question. James is aware of this difficulty and attempts to provide an answer. Association, according to James, is found to rest on the factors of repetition of the process, intensity of the process, and the lack of an opposing process. 26 Now it is precisely in connection with the last of these factors that the relation between volition and association becomes evident. Concern here is directed to the volition of consent and the manner in which deliberation is settled.

The process of deliberation contains endless degrees of complication. At every

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25 James, *Principles*, I, 566.
26 Ibid., 567
moment of it our consciousness is an extremely complex object, namely, the existence of the whole set of motives, and their conflict. . . Of this object, the totality of which is realized more or less dimly all the while, certain parts stand out more or less sharply at one moment in the foreground, and at another moment other parts, in consequence of the oscillations of our attention and of the 'associative' flow of our ideas. 27

Thus, deliberation is seen to be dependent on the workings of the associative machinery. Deliberation, then is simply the balancing of various motives until the issue is settled and the way to action is cleared.

The role of association in the volition of consent now becomes clear. The associative machinery provides the will with a vast array of ideas and their associates from which the will may choose. The sole function of the will is to "emphasize and linger over those which seem pertinent, and ignore the rest." 28 Furthermore, the act of lingering and choosing among the associates allows the associates of an idea to gather around one idea or another until the force of the gathering associates and its core idea weigh so heavily on the moment that "their neural processes break through the bar, and

27 James, Principles, II, 528-529.

28 James, Briefer Course, p. 274.
the nervous wave pours into the tract which has so long been awaiting its advent." 29 Association, then, is the foundation of the volition of consent.

One further point about the volition of consent must be noted. The four modes of decision included under the heading of the volition of consent are all characterized by a certain amount of passivity. For example, in the first type of decision, the reasonable type, action is kept in suspense because of the feeling that the evidence is not all in.

But some day we wake with the sense that we see the thing rightly, that no new light will be thrown on the subject by further delay, and that the matter had better be settled now. In this easy transition from doubt to assurance we seem to ourselves almost passive; the 'reasons' which decide us appearing to flow in from the nature of things, and to owe nothing to our will. We have, however, a perfect sense of being free, in that we are devoid of any feeling of coercion.

All four types of decision included under the volition of consent are characterized by this passivity. In fact, this is true of the greater part of one's volitional life. "Consent is passive; and three-fourths of our daily conduct consists in simply taking off the brakes, and letting ideas and impulses have their way." 31 On the other hand, "volition

29 James, Briefer Course, p. 274.
30 James, Principles, II, 531.
implies something positive, energetic, akin to effort."  

Now, from such an account it seems clear that consent occupies a sphere somewhat removed from the juridical process itself. In fact, the greater portion of the work of volition is carried on at the level of association. Although consent is present and even necessary to decision it is in no way involved in the struggle itself. The idea and its band of associates which finally manages to occupy the focal point owes its survival to the workings of the associative machinery. Consent is merely an indifferent witness to the process and in no way involved in it. Consent seems to be required for little more than granting its formal stamp of approval.

Such, then, is the place of association in the volitional life. In summarizing the relation of volition and association James's own statement is perhaps clearest. "Volition is the association of ideas of muscular motion with the ideas of those pleasures which motion produces. The motion at first occurs automatically and results in a pleasure unforeseen. The latter becomes so associated with the motion that whenever we think of it the idea of the motion arises; and the idea of the motion when vivid causes the motion to occur. This is an act of will."  

32Ibid.  
33James, Principles, I, 599-600.
The volition of consent, however, does not exhaust the discussion of the phenomenon of will. In the discussion of association it was noted that the will lingers and chooses among the ideas and their associates. Further, in the fifth type of decision it was seen that an additional force was required to end deliberation. Decision was achieved only by means of a resolute effort in favor of one of the conflicting ideas. Both of these aspects, lingering and effort, will be found to be based on James's notion of attention. These aspects will be found to be at the very core of James's theory of volition.

B. Attention and Effort

Among the various sense impressions to which one is exposed in everyday experience only a few actually receive attention at any given moment. Now, this is but another way of saying that consciousness exercises a selective activity. James lists several physiological reasons to account for this fact. First, the hemispheres, when occupied by incoming currents, keep other currents out. Second, since the activity of the hemispheres tends at all times to be consolidated and unified, consciousness will thereby be narrow. Consciousness is determinable only as a whole.34 This does not mean to say, however, that there can be no other processes in the

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34 James, Briefer Course, p. 217.
sphere of consciousness, for there are processes occupying other areas of consciousness. What is being considered at present is the focal point of consciousness.

In order to account for the unity of the hemispheres during the attentive process James enumerates three physiological conditions. The first of these conditions requires that the appropriate cortical center be excited both ideationally as well as sensorially before the attentive process can occur. Second, the sense organ must dispose itself aptly to receive the object. This is achieved by the appropriate muscular activity. And third, there is probably a certain afflux of blood to the cortical center.\(^3\) Of the third condition James says no more for it admits of no proof, and he merely states it on the faith of general analogies. The second condition, the accommodation of the sense organ involves such everyday experiences as the turning of the eyes or ears toward the source of visual or auditory activity in the environment. Among the three conditions enumerated by James the first commands special attention because it seems to exceed the realm of purely physiological factors and situates itself on the psychical level; it seems to straddle the psychical and physiological spheres. There are, then, ideational as well as physiological causes involved in attention, for the first

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 228
condition makes it quite clear that physiological causes alone are not themselves sufficient to account for attention.

Although the basis of division of attention is complex, the only basis important to the present purpose is the difference between voluntary and involuntary attention. An object of involuntary attention "appeals to some one of our congenital impulses or has a directly exciting quality." 36 "Voluntary attention," on the other hand, "is always derived; we never make an effort to attend to an object except for the sake of some remote interest which the effort will serve." 37 Thus voluntary and involuntary attention are distinguished on the basis of immediate or remote ends.

But given the fact that consciousness is complex, what about those moments when consciousness is complicated by two or more ideas both of which are immediately appealing? In such cases, according to James, decision is achieved only through effort. Attention is given to one of the conflicting ideas thereby excluding the others. And this is the fifth type of decision. This kind of decision stands out against the other four kinds of decision which are settled on the level of the associative machinery. But in the fifth type of decision, a solution on the associative level is impossible.

36 Ibid., p. 221.
37 Ibid.
It requires some additional force to break the deadlock. In these moments of decision, the additional force is experienced as the feeling of effort.

Subjectively and phenomenally, the feeling of effort, absent from the former decisions, accompanies these. Whether it be the dreary resignation for the sake of austere and naked duty of all sorts of rich mundane delights, or whether it be the heavy resolve that of two mutually exclusive trains of future fact, both sweet and good, and with no strictly objective or imperative principle of choice between them, one shall forevermore become impossible, while the other shall become reality, it is a desolate and acrid sort of act, an excursion into a lonesome moral wilderness. If examined closely, its chief difference from the three former cases appears to be that in those cases the mind at the moment of deciding on the triumphant alternative dropped the other one wholly or nearly out of sight, whereas here both alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose.

Attention, then, is at the bottom of the volition of effort. For it is by means of effort that one achieves resolution of otherwise insoluble conflicts. In choosing by means of the effort of attention one exercises power on one's own act. This is the core of the Jamesian theory of volition.

Not only is attention at the bottom of the volition of effort, but it is also at the bottom of the volition of consent. This is so because the volition of consent is based on the doctrine of association. The function of the will in the volition of consent is the lingering and choosing of the

38James, Principles, II, 534.
appropriate ideas and their associates. Now, such lingering and choosing is achieved by means of attention—the attending to this idea rather than another. Hence, the principles discussed in the account of the effort of attention can be extended to include voluntary association.

James's own words summarize very well everything already said in this examination of volition: "This strain of attention is the fundamental act of the will." 39

In the light of the foregoing discussion there would seem to be no doubt as to James's position on the question of free-will. His account of the role of effort in moments of decision seems to provide the basis for including him among the ranks of those who hold the doctrine of free-will. Such a conclusion, however, would be somewhat premature. For it must be remembered that James has been considering the question of free-will within the framework of the science of psychology.

The nature of volition was discovered as a result of the elucidation of James's theory of consciousness. James characterized consciousness as being a stream, a complex continuum, and a type of activity known as reflex action. These aspects taken together constitute consciousness as being by its very nature impulsive. According to James, any theory of volition must take its starting point from this principle of the

39Ibid., 452.
impulsiveness of consciousness. Volition, then, can be understood only against the background of the mechanisms of consciousness. Further, on the basis of association and attention two kinds of volition are recognized, the volition of consent and effort, respectively. Effort, according to James, is the point at which any claim for the freedom of the will must take its stand, since everything else seems due to mechanical laws. Precisely at this point, however, James the psychologist has one final word to add: the question of free-will is insoluble on purely psychological grounds.

But such a conclusion seems totally foreign to everything James has already said. It is as if with one stroke James has invalidated all the data so carefully gathered from his analysis of volition. This is strikingly true with regard to the phenomenon of effort. In the fifth type of decision effort was seen to have a vital role in the resolution of otherwise insoluble conflicts. Its function in this last type of decision is the dwelling on one of the conflicting ideas to the exclusion of the other. If effort could sustain or protract an idea long enough from its associates to gather around it, then this idea would occupy the focal point of consciousness and therefore quite automatically beget its own motor effects. Without effort, however, resolution and consequent action were impossible. Effort, then, is the basis of free-will. The fact of the matter is, according to James, that the effort involved
in this sort of volition is so minute that it cannot be measured, the implication being that the science of psychology can make no claims concerning the question of free-will.

But one might immediately object that the inability of the science of psychology to measure the amount of effort exerted is hardly grounds for excusing itself from a consideration of the question. For is it not true that James has described such moments of decision as involving a "straining of the attention?" And what of the subjectively felt effort in moments of decision? The feeling of effort, and the feeling that more or less could be exerted, seems sufficient for admitting the freedom of the will. The feeling of effort, however, is not sufficient to satisfy the science of psychology. For the experienced as experienced is evidently not sufficient grounds for the science of psychology to admit that effort is an indeterminate factor. Nothing less than the experienced as verifiable will satisfy this science. And this sort of verification demands, as James conceives it, a quantified equivalent of effort. And since effort is too minute a quantity to be measured, psychology can make no claims on this question. But why, after all, must effort be capable of measurement in order that the science of psychology can make some contribution to a solution of the problem? This attitude seems to betray a distrust of immediate sense experience.

James provides the basis for this interpretation in his
analysis of the fundamental problem of the science of psychology as it approaches the question of free-will. The problem, according to James, revolves around the question whether effort is determinate or indeterminate in amount.

It certainly appears to us indeterminate, and as if, even with an unchanging object, we might make more or less, as we choose. If it be really indeterminate, our future acts are ambiguous or unpredestinate; in common parlance, our wills are free. If the amount of effort be not indeterminate, but be related in a fixed manner to the objects themselves, in such wise that whatever object at any time fills our consciousness was from eternity bound to fill it then and there, and compel from us the exact effort, neither more nor less, which we bestow upon it—then our wills are not free, and all our acts are foredained. The question of fact in the free-will controversy is thus extremely simple. It relates solely to the amount of effort of attention or consent which we can at any time put forth. Are the duration and intensity of this effort fixed functions of the object, or are they not?

Thus, the question of fact in the free-will controversy bears on whether effort is a fixed function of the object or an independent variable. Having established the question of fact in the matter of free-will James proceeds to answer the question as to the ability of the science of psychology to provide an answer.

My own belief is that the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychologic grounds. After a certain amount of effort of attention has been given to an idea it is manifestly impossible to tell whether either more or less of it might have been given or not. To tell that, we should have to ascend to the antecedents of the

4C James, Principles, II, 571.
effort, and defining them with mathematical exactitude, prove, by laws of which we have not at present even an inkling, that the only amount of sequent effort which could possibly comport with them was the precise amount which actually came. Measurements, whether of psychic or of neural quantities, and deductive reasonings such as this method implies, will surely be forever beyond human reach. 41

Since, then, the science of psychology can make no measurement of effort in the effort of attention, it can make no pronouncement on the question of free-will.

In order to avoid confusion let us be explicit with regard to the exact point in question. From James's analysis it is abundantly clear that the fundamental question of fact in the free-will controversy hinges on whether effort is determinate or indeterminate in amount. Presently, however, we are interested in the method of the science of psychology as it approaches this question. Before the science of psychology can make any pronouncement on the question of free-will the ground of the possibility of dealing with the phenomenon itself must be established. That is to say, before any conclusion can be reached evidence must be available as the foundation upon which the conclusion rests. The only way in which the science of psychology can say anything whatsoever about the question of fact in the free-will controversy is on the condition that effort can be quantified in some way. The possibility of the

41 James, Principles, II, 572.
quantification of effort means first of all that the effort involved in the effort of attention be of sufficient magnitude to affect the instruments which are designed to detect and record it as a quantified datum indicated, presumably, by some sort of pointer reading. Now, it is precisely at this point that the science of psychology finds itself not only unable to offer an answer to the question, but even unable to establish any sort of connection with the phenomenon to be investigated. Because of its minute character, effort fails to make itself available as a recorded datum. As a consequence of its failure to make itself known as a quantified datum, effort must be denied the honor of scientific respectability. In other words, it is because of the immeasurability of effort that the science of psychology can make no pronouncement on the question of free-will.

This interpretation is buttressed by James's observations on the matter of attention. "Effort may be an original force and not a mere effect, and it may be indeterminate in amount. The last word of sober insight here is ignorance, for the forces engaged are too delicate ever to be measured in detail. Thus, as far as the science of psychology is concerned, the question of free-will is unanswerable because of the minute character of effort which lies beyond the range of instrument

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42James, Briefer Course, p. 238.
detection.

On the subjective level, however, the experience of effort and the effects it involves cannot be denied.

The effects of interested attention and volition remain. These activities seem to hold fast to certain elements and, by emphasizing them and dwelling on them, to make their associates the only ones which are evoked. This is the point at which an anti-mechanical psychology must, if anywhere, make its stand in dealing with association. Everything else is pretty certainly due to cerebral laws . . . But even though there be a mental spontaneity, it can certainly not create ideas or summon them ex abrupto. Its power is limited to selecting amongst those which the associative machinery introduces. If it can emphasize, reinforce, or protract for half a second either of these, it can do all that the most eager advocate of free will need demand . . .43

Such is the last word of James the psychologist regarding the question of free will. Free will is hypothetically true, on the condition that the amount of effort exerted is indeterminate. Or perhaps one might say that as far as the science of psychology is concerned free will is possible only.

Although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the science of psychology is unable to make any claim on the question of human freedom, there is yet another avenue of approach by which one may explore the question. Such an approach considers the question under its philosophical aspects. In his philosophical approach to the question of human freedom James considers his own contribution to a solution of the question

43James, Briefer Course, p. 279.
to be quite modest in comparison to the work of others who have considered the question. Among the others who have considered the question, James refers to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. James's sole purpose in considering the question is aimed at merely clarifying some of the necessarily implied corollaries of the doctrine of determinism in order that one may reasonably decide the issue in its true light.

44 C. S. Peirce, "The Doctrine of Necessity Examined," The Monist II, (April, 1892), 321-337. In this article Peirce adduces the principle of chance-spontaneity to account for irregularities in the universe. His argument is directed against the necessitarian who prefers to suppose that specification in every order, psychical as well as physical, reverts back to the very beginning of things. Such a conception precludes the possibility of any novelty in the universe. James's own rejection of deterministic monism is based on the same sort of argument.
CHAPTER IV

PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF FREEDOM

Admittedly, James offers no coercive proof in behalf of free will. "I thus disclaim openly on the threshold all pretension to prove to you that the freedom of the will is true. The most I hope is to induce some of you to follow my own example in assuming it true, and acting as if it were true." However, James's invitation to follow his example in regarding the freedom of the will as true may at first glance seem to be based on a totally gratuitous assumption. If there be no coercive proof then one could equally well assume that the will is not free. For James, the question of freedom is not limited to the sphere of academic curiosities where logical principles reign supreme. On the contrary, the only meaning the freedom of the will has is its relation to the experiences of life. The basis of value for assuming the will to be free lies in the life situation.

Before examining the meaning of freedom in relation to the life situation, it is worth noting James's reason for considering philosophy incompetent in this matter. Now, the

first step in solving any problem is to state the problem. Such a step involves the naming of relevant terms. Further, of crucial importance is finding the right names for the issues involved, since providing the right name is equivalent to seeing the issues in their true light. The question of the freedom of the will is complicated enough without further encumbering it with ambiguities so familiar on the linguistic level. To this end, James proposes to rid the discussion of the eulogistic word freedom, and replace it with the opprobrious word chance. This is required by the fact that the former word is too rich in subjective intention. As a substitute for freedom, chance means that there is a certain ambiguity about future events. Chance events are in no way obliged to make their appearance at a given time. There is no necessity in the scheme of things demanding that these events make their advent at a given moment. Chance, when it comes, is a free gift outside the claims of any other part of the universe.

In an essay especially dedicated to the question of freedom, James transposes the question to the level of the dispute between determinism and indeterminism. As the issues present themselves at this level the whole meaning of the question

46 For the reasoning behind this statement see James, Briefer Course, p. 453.
"relates solely to the existence of possibilities."\(^{47}\)

On the one hand, indeterminism grants that there is order in the universe based on natural laws, but regards some of the actions of man as lying outside these natural laws, since man is capable of intelligent action. And the personal feeling of one's power over the moment, the feeling that things are being decided here and now, is the best available evidence in behalf of this view. Man is capable of choosing alternatives, and in the choosing of one man makes his contribution to the world. Hence, human history is being decided from moment to moment, for in this scheme, man is the maker of history.

Determinism, on the other hand, regards the existence of possibilities in the universe as destructive of the order of things. Determinism demands order in the universe. Each and every action of each and every part of the universe, from the largest planet to the smallest atom, is completely determined. A denial of this is equivalent to denying the intelligibility of things and, hence, the possibility of human knowledge. Man flatters himself by thinking that he makes some contribution to the development of the world; for he is little more than a pawn on the chess-board of history. And the personal feeling that things are being decided here and now is illusory. So

\(^{47}\)James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," p. 151.
radical is determinism's demand for order that it relieves man of power on his own act and on the world. In such a scheme man is no maker of history, he is merely its witness.

Indeterminism holds that there is a certain loose play among the parts of the universe, and that the laying down of some of these parts does not necessarily decree what the other parts shall be. Determinism professes that the parts of the universe already laid down absolutely decree what the other parts shall be. 48

No matter which explanation of the nature of things seems more akin to one's own particular philosophical orientation, there nevertheless remains the curious and disturbing fact that although these two doctrines begin with exactly the same facts of experience they develop and terminate in diametrically opposed views.

Perhaps an application of each of these two opposing views to a hypothetical situation will clarify the differences involved. What, asks James, is meant by saying that his choice of which way to walk home after giving the present lecture is at the present moment ambiguous and a matter of chance? "It means that both Divinity Avenue and Oxford Street are called; but that only one, and that one, either one, shall be chosen." 49

48 Ibid., p. 150.
49 Ibid., p. 155.
That is to say, that prior to one's actual choosing, both alternatives were possible. And at the moment of decision the issue was settled. One of the alternatives, and this the chosen one, was reduced from possibility to actuality, while the other alternative, and this the rejected one, was reduced from possibility to impossibility, at least as far as the present moment is concerned. The important point is that until the moment of decision both alternatives were equally possible. This is the interpretation given by indeterminism.

However, according to the interpretation given by determinism one of the alternatives had been impossible from eternity. To say that something is ambiguous or a matter of chance is equivalent to ascribing irrationality to it. Nothing else could have been in its place, for it and it alone was demanded by the rest of nature.

Determinism, however, seems to overstep itself at this point. Prior to the actual occurrence determinism had nothing to say about which alternative was possible and which one was impossible. It is only after the fact of the actual occurrence itself that determinism makes its pronouncement of impossibility, that this and only this occurrence is consistent with the scheme of things, and that nothing else had even the remotest possibility of becoming actual. But this argument of determinism is invalid as far as a conclusive proof is concerned. Since both of these arguments have their starting
points in actual fact, no conclusive proof from actuality to impossibility can be attained.

In the light of the invalidity of determinism's argument from actuality to impossibility and James's discussion of freedom under the name of chance, it seems likely that James would decide in favor of indeterminism. For he seems to have declared the existence of chance events. "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 be a world of chance or no; at most, we have agreed that it seems so." And then, as if to remove all doubt about the exact nature of his task, James adds a qualifying remark: "And I now repeat what I said at the outset, that, from any strict theoretical point of view, the question is insoluble."

Thus indeterminism will continue defending the feeling that the individual decides history and adds novelty to the world, while the determinist carps back that such a feeling is illusory, because it was destined to be this way and no other. On the theoretic level determinism and indeterminism are engaged in an interminable dialogue.

The theoretic level is not the only level at which this

50 James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," p. 159.
51 Ibid.
question may be approached. On the personal level one of these explanations may fit one's own notion of the nature of things.

Now, whichever argument seems best fitted to explain the nature of things depends on what sort of universe one understands oneself to inhabit. Should it be a monistic universe, then the argument of determinism is best fitted to explain the facts. On the other hand, should it be a pluralistic universe, then the argument of indeterminism is best fitted to explain the facts. This is so because a pluralistic universe allows possibilities, while the monistic universe denies them. Fundamentally, such reasons as these are responsible for choosing either determinism or indeterminism to represent one's view of the universe. "What divides us into possibility 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, determinists or indeterminists, is at bottom always some sentiment like this."52 Note, however, that the selection of alternatives is not based on the cogency of the arguments themselves, but on evidence lying entirely outside either argument. The selection is made on the basis of what sort of universe one is thought

52 Ibid., pp. 152-153.
to inhabit. Or, as James phrases it, on the sentiment of rationality.

The basis, then, for choosing between determinism and indeterminism, rests on a matter of personal taste. Certainly such a view operates within the framework of certain basic assumptions about the intrinsic constitution of the universe, but in the final analysis it is still a matter of taste or sentiment. This being the case, the question of determinism versus indeterminism can be transposed to the level of the difference between monism and pluralism. Whichever one of these is accepted determines whether the universe receives a deterministic or indeterministic interpretation.

The dilemma between monism and pluralism is what James calls "the most pregnant of all the dilemmas in philosophy."\(^{53}\) The selection of either alternative involves a host of implications which must be accepted.

Monism, according to James, views the world as one unbending fact. "The universe is tight, monism claims, not loose; and you must take the irreducible whole of it as it is offered, or have no part or lot in it at all."\(^{54}\) To admit loose play among the parts is tantamount to intellectual suicide. Among


\(^{54}\)Ibid., p. 136.
the various objections James offers against the notion of a monistic universe, one is of special interest. This is his objection to the universe conceived as fatalistic. Although possibility and impossibility seem to be essential categories of human thinking, monism regards the former as pure illusion. And this must be so in a monistic universe, for in this sort of universe everything is linked to every other thing and the principle of causality is regnant. Causality extends into the remote past and links each and every succeeding moment thereafter. What is now is only the result of that which preceded it. Every effect is already contained in its cause. Such a process extends backward until the ultimate terminus a quo is reached. But in this sort of universe, a monistic universe in which causality reigns supreme, the end is already contained in the beginning. Novelty, therefore, is impossible.

It is in this sort of universe that determinism finds its own proper environment. For determinism 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." Since monism and determinism rule out possibilities, they therefore rule out freedom.

55 James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," p. 150.
But such an explanation of the scheme of things is not satisfactory to one's own sense of freedom. "Our sense of 'freedom' supposes that some things at least are decided here and now, that the passing moment may contain some novelty, be an original starting-point of events, and not merely transmit a push from elsewhere."\(^56\) In James's view the present is not merely a transfer agency whose sole purpose is the passing along of that which has been determined ages ago. On the contrary, the present makes a real contribution of its own and is, therefore, in terms of that which has preceded it, something really new.

On the other hand, pluralism does not require that the universe be constructed along such rigid lines. It admits a certain loose play among the parts and considers them immersed in a wider sea of possibilities. "Some parts of the world," pluralism admits, "cannot exist out of their wholes; but others it says, can. To some extent the world seems genuinely additive: it may really be so. (We cannot explain conceptually how genuine novelties can come; but if one did come we could experience that it came. We do, in fact, experience perceptual novelties all the while) . . . So the common-sense view of life, as something really dramatic, with work done, and things decided here and now, is acceptable to pluralism. 'Free will'

\(^{56}\text{James, Some Problems of Philosophy, p. 139.}\)
means nothing but real novelty; so pluralism accepts the notion of free will." To James, then, pluralism with its attending indeterminism is the only interpretation consonant with experience.

The argument in "The Dilemma of Determinism" is based on what James calls the judgment of regret. It is a fact of experience that human beings are constantly called upon to make judgments of regret. That is to say, there are actual events in the range of one's experiences that would have left the world in a better condition had they never occurred. In other words, some events in human experience are regarded as regrettable. These are such things as murder, treachery, and the like which are universally allowed to be regrettable. And even though such events as these may seem to be a fine mechanical fit with the rest of the universe, they are a poor moral fit. Though compatible with the chemic drift and flow of things, such events jar upon the moral aspects of life. Judgment expresses itself in this respect by saying that something else ought to be in their place.

Determinism, however, regards these events as necessary from eternity. Nothing else, after all, could have occurred in their place. For to admit that it is a chance event would be equivalent to obliterating intelligibility in the world.

57 Ibid., pp. 140-141.
If, as determinism conceives the matter, such events are required by every preceding event, then it is necessary that this event makes its advent at precisely this moment. In fact, nothing else had the slightest chance of occurring, for this and only this was destined to be at this point. But on this interpretation the meaning of regret becomes somewhat ambiguous. For determinism, this is equivalent to saying that the universe would be better without that which is necessary to it. The judgment of regret calls some events bad. "Calling a thing bad means, if it mean 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." 58 But on deterministic grounds to regret the occurrence of only one or a few events is simply not enough. Things being what they are these events could not be otherwise. What is to be regretted is the whole scheme of things which makes this event only a small part of a larger whole. In reality, what is to be regretted is the very structure of the universe itself.

For determinism to say that though it is impossible for some other event to have occurred yet it would have been better had another event occurred is to espouse a kind of

pessimism. But pessimism is inconsistent in a world of events which cannot be otherwise. In order for determinism to escape pessimism it must abandon the judgment of regret. This may be accomplished by regarding the so-called regretful occurrences in the universe, more commonly known as evils, as being the condition by which a greater good is produced. That is to say, the presence of evil in the universe really makes the universe a better place, since it allows the production of a greater good that could never have been achieved had evil been lacking.

Having undergone an ethical metamorphosis deterministic pessimism becomes a deterministic optimism by abolishing the judgment of regret. But this begets a rather strange logical predicament. Determinism calls the judgment of regret wrong because it is pessimistic in implying that what is impossible nevertheless ought to be. But if the judgment of regret is wrong, then it ought to be replaced by another kind of judgment and this, presumably, would be a judgment of approval. But since this judgment is necessary nothing else can be in its place. Thus, the discussion immediately lapses into the same difficulty as before, namely, a universe in which what ought to be seems impossible. No sooner has one phase of the problem been settled than another phase presents itself.
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 theoretic absurdities and errors. The theoretic and 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 cannot be good without regret being bad; regret cannot not be good without treachery and murder being bad. Both, however, are supposed to have been foredoomed; so something must be fatally unreasonable, absurd, and wrong in the world.

Hence, determinism finds itself in a rather awkward position on the question of evil. Now, determinism cannot bury its head in the sand ostrich-like and ignore the problem. For judgments of regret, or evils, are existing facts in the world and determinism is obliged to consider them in its account of all that is fated to be.

Yet without searching too far there may be a way to obviate this difficulty. The necessary events wrongly regretted may be really good and yet the error in regretting them may be also good. To accomplish such a solution requires but one simple condition: "The world must not be regarded as a machine whose final purpose is the making real of any outward good, but rather a contrivance for deepening the theoretic consciousness of what goodness and evil in their intrinsic natures are. Not the doing either of good or of evil is what nature cares for, but the knowing of them." 60 And this attitude toward the world is

59 Ibid., pp. 163-164.
60 Ibid., p. 165.
what James refers to as the gnostical attitude. According to this attitude the world is neither an optimism nor a pessimism, but rather, a gnosticism. But since this word has an already established association, James calls it subjectivism, and the subjectivistic attitude.

The essential aspect of subjectivism, according to James, is the fact that it considers what happens in the world as subsidiary to what one thinks or feels about it. Evil justifies evil by awakening man's sense of evil, and eventually remorse and regret about its existence. And the error in remorse and regret, the error of thinking that it could have been otherwise, justifies itself by its use. Now, a purely mechanical determinism, which James calls hard determinism, smiles in the face of any moral claims made on events in the world. It is convinced that the world abides by the law of physical continuity and moral attitudes toward it are nothing but loose thinking. Considering few of his listeners to be of this view, James approaches the problem of what he calls soft determinism. This latter kind of determinism allows questions of good and evil to mingle with questions of cause and effect. But in allowing these questions to mingle determinism involves itself in a dilemma. "The dilemma of this determinism is one whose left horn is pessimism and whose right horn is subjectivism. In other words, if determinism is to escape pessimism, it must leave off looking at the goods and ills of life in a simple
objective way, and regard them as materials, indifferent in themselves, for the production of consciousness, scientific and ethical, in us." Now, to be satisfied with pessimism in considering the whole as bad is to make the least amount of demands on the universe. Of this attitude James has nothing to say. For his own part, however, he prefers to pursue the question further, since his own view demands more of the universe.

The other horn of the dilemma involves subjectivism. Subjectivism regards the goods and evils in the world as practically indistinguishable except insofar as they elicit moral judgments. Its sole aim is the attainment of knowledge of good and evil. Men should engage in the goods and evils of the world chiefly for the purpose of enriching their own consciousness of good and evil. The things of the world are merely instruments in the process. The mood or attitude achieved as a result of the encounter with the things of the world is of primary importance. It is the tasting of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the tasting alone, that is important. Now, in order to attain the maximum degree of the knowledge of good and evil it becomes necessary to expose oneself to the widest possible range of experiences. But if the sole aim of this attitude is to deepen man's subjective knowledge of the world, why should there be any limit to such a

61 Ibid., p. 166.
process? In such a conception there seems to be no room for a hierarchy of values. According to James, the past history of the world provides evidence of what to expect from this attitude.

Everywhere it fosters the fatalistic mood of mind. It makes those who are already too inert more passive still; it renders wholly reckless those whose energy is already in excess. All through history we find how subjectivism, as soon as it has a free career, exhausts itself in every sort of spiritual, moral and practical license. Its optimism turns to an ethical indifference, which infallibly brings dissolution in its train . . . After the pure and classic truths, the exciting and rancid ones must be experienced; and if the stupid virtues of the philistine herd do not then come in and save society from the influence of the children of light, a sort of inward putrefaction becomes its inevitable doom. 62

If feeling becomes both the source and limit of knowledge, nothing else can be expected. At its worst, subjectivism degenerates into a crude sensualism. The subjectivistic attitude by its nature provides no defense against this sort of dissolution. If life has no other meaning than the exploitation and edification of the momentary and changing sensibilities encountered in life, then the world seems to be a rather gloomy, meaningless place after all.

Such an explanation is not acceptable to James's way of thinking. To be sure, his objections are not theoretic; they are of the practical order. James chooses words of Carlyle to express his feelings in this matter: "Hang your sensibilities!

62 Ibid., pp. 171-172
Stop your snivelling complaints, and your equally snivelling raptures! Leave off your general emotional tomfoolery, and get to WORK like men." But this constitutes a break with the subjectivistic attitude toward the world. It means that man is a creature with a task to be accomplished and not simply a creature immersed in the feeling of the moment. Successive moments become the measure of man's success in dealing with the facts of life. And conduct, not feeling, becomes the principal concern of life. With the realization that a task lies before him, man has made the transition from the subjective to the objective philosophy of things. It matters little whether the task be accepted gladly and willingly or grudgingly and unwillingly; only accomplished it must be. Having accepted the task and accomplished his end, however small that may be, man is at peace with the rest of the world. This is so because in this view each individual part may help or hinder the other parts, but the individual's obligation ends with the performance of his own duty. The individual players in the world drama are responsible only for their own roles. They have been called to contribute to only part of the drama. But to what end the drama may lead rests with the author of the drama itself.

The only consistent way of representing such a pluralistic world, a world in which the semi-independent parts affect each

63Ibid., p. 174.
other for good or evil, is the indeterministic way. For what
gain is there in feeling that the right way has been achieved
unless the wrong way was felt to be equally possible? What
meaning would remorse and regret, blame and condemnation have
unless the right way were an open possibility? Without am-
biguity or chance about future events there is no meaning. "I
cannot understand regret without the admission of real, gen-
une 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 mourn." 64

And so, after a long and involved consideration of the
question of determinism versus indeterminism, James confesses
that he is obliged to state his conclusions in an altogether
personal way. But it cannot be otherwise, as he conceives it,
for this method is demanded by the very nature of the problem.
Even so, the world still remains a mystery no matter what view
one takes about it. The indeterminism James defends, "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 wrongly. And it repre-
sents their acting wrong as a matter of possibility or accident

64 Ibid., p. 176.
neither inevitable nor yet to be infallibly warded off. . . . It gives us a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene. . . ." 65

This same line of argumentation appears in Pragmatism where it takes the form of an argument from a melioristic universe. Determinism regards the notion of possibility as a product of human ignorance. It is convinced that "necessity and impossibility between them rule the destinies of the world." 66 Free will in this sort of universe means that things can be other, and most important, better than they have been. Were it the case that the past and the present are completely good, man would be only too happy to have the future imitate them. In this kind of world free will would be man's greatest blight. "Freedom in a world already perfect could only mean freedom to be worse, and who could be so insane to wish that." 67 Hence, the only possibility one can claim for the world is that it may be better. In this sense free will is considered a doctrine of relief. It provides a basis for hope about the future through human intervention. "Free will pragmatically means novelties in the world, the right to expect

65 Ibid., pp. 176-177.
66 William James, Pragmatism (New York, 1907), p. 84.
67 Ibid., p. 85.
that in its deepest elements as well as in its surface phenomena, the future may not identically repeat and imitate the past." And the only way that novelties can occur is if there are real possibilities in the present moment. The question, then, as James indicated at the outset, "relates solely to the existence of possibilities."

The difference between monism and pluralism is the difference between unity and multiplicity. Monism and pluralism differ radically on the question whether the world is on its way from unity or to unity. If the monistic universe could be characterized as a universe in which "in the beginning was the Word," then the pluralistic universe could be characterized as the universe in which "in the beginning were the words." And this characterization of the pluralistic universe seems consonant with James's preference in speaking of the Ultimate rather than the Absolute.

In James's pluralistic universe multiplicity forms an integral part. The working out of one's destiny is a piecemeal task in this universe, but it can be done because there is possibility. And man through his choice of possibilities determines his own future.

68 Ibid., p. 84.
69 Ibid., p. 106.
CHAPTER V

CRITIQUE OF JAMES'S NOTION OF FREEDOM

On the basis of all that has been said there can be no doubt that James holds for the notion of human freedom. At the outset of his philosophical analysis James envisages the question at the level of the dispute between determinism and indeterminism. At this level James observed that the question related solely to the existence of possibilities. And the kind of possibilities James has in mind are those which make no demands on the rest of nature, neither antecedent nor consequent. For admit either and one sinks back into the block universe of monism in which causality allows no single fact to escape its all pervading reach. In such a universe freedom under the name of chance is impossible. To his original appraisal of the question James remains true. Although the dispute between determinism and indeterminism was found to be insoluble on the purely theoretic level, indeterminism was chosen because of its compatibility with the kind of universe one is thought to inhabit. In James's case this was seen to be a pluralistic universe, because it allows one to feel that his
deeds influence the character of the universe. Moreover, in such a view one's deeds may influence the universe for the better.

James's moral argument in favor of freedom is based on the experiences of life. The subjective experiences of entertaining and choosing alternatives, feeling that changes have been wrought in the world, and feeling that the world can become a better place through human action are part and parcel of the human experience. No matter how common certain human actions may outwardly appear, they are inwardly unique. In one's own personal experience decision is an undeniable fact. "To yourselves, it is true, those very acts of choice, which to me are so blind, opaque, and external, are the opposites of this; for you are within them and effect them. To you they appear as decisions; and decisions, for him who makes them, are altogether peculiar psychic facts." 70 This felt power on one's own acts and on the world allows one to feel that he has a part in determining what sort of world this will be. And this sort of world becomes possible when one views the world of human actions as a world governed by choice, not destiny.

Presumably, everything already said on the psychological

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70 James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," p. 158.
aspects of volition are applicable here. The sustaining of one idea rather than others by means of the effort of attention allows one to choose one possibility rather than another, thereby making it actual. This actuality assumes its place in the world as man's contribution to the world.

No sooner, however, is the Jamesian notion of freedom characterized as that which effects, or allows man to effect, changes in the world than a difficulty arises. This difficulty is concerned with James's notion of agency in action. Criticism of James's thought at this point is conspicuous by comparison to the absence of criticism elsewhere in our treatment of James's notion of freedom. Yet this difficulty, since it underlies both the psychological and philosophical aspects of the question and touches the very ground of freedom, cannot be ignored. When pressed on the meaning of agency, James's answer seems to shake the very ground of freedom itself.

By its very nature the consideration of agency in human action involves the metaphysical notion of substance. The present inquiry will not attempt to treat the notion of substance as it occurs in James's thought. Rather, it will approach the problem under the aspect of agency alone, that is, the way in which one thing influences another thing. Or more accurately perhaps, it will consider the notion of efficient causality. In this connection the inquiry will concentrate on making one small point regarding the notion of agency in
James's thought: this is the fact that James is indifferent to the notion of agency.

Earlier, we noted that James's notion of freedom concerned itself solely with the existence of possibilities in the universe. Now, if free will is solely a question of possibility, then the means by which possibility is reduced to actuality is of paramount importance. In the preceding analysis decision was seen to reduce possibility to actuality. But then a question immediately arises: How is it that inward decision has outward effects? The answer to this question must constitute the very ground of freedom itself.

One expression of James's indifference to the notion of agency is to be found in an illuminating passage from his correspondences in which he expresses his feelings in this matter in unequivocal terms. . . . I care absolutely nothing whether there be 'agents' or no agents, or whether man's actions be really 'his' or not. What I care for is that my moral reactions should find a real outward application." This is not just an isolated remark culled from among scattered and private expressions of James's thought. On the contrary, it is consonant with the general spirit of pragmatism which exhorts

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71 See above, p. 46.

72 William James, *The Letters of William James* (Boston, 1926) II, 141.
one to look away from first things, from principles and abstract notions, and look to final things, the fruits of human thought and action. Even if one were to grant the pragmatic approach in this instance, it would still be a strange moral universe in which agency and responsibility were lacking.

James's indifference to the notion of agency is nowhere more evident than it is in the foregoing passage. But such a view seems to cut the ground from under any form of moral action. In expressing this indifference to the agent in activity and yet speaking of moral acts having application in the world, James is proceeding as if there are agents. Freedom, like morality, requires more than bare possibilities. James's assertion that men are within their deeds and effect them becomes ambiguous when considered in the light of his attitude toward agency in action.

To establish the existence of human freedom, James felt that it was imperative to break the cosmic block, the strictly concatenated causal universe of deterministic monism. To this end the all-pervasive principle of causality must be destroyed. Without causality in every event James felt that there is some ambiguity about future events. In this connection freedom under the name of chance becomes meaningful. Free acts, or chance events, come into existence with no antecedent claims demanding that they make their appearance at a certain point. Chance viewed in this way is an independent variable not deducible
from the antecedent conditions. Until the moment of decision the selection of one possibility rather than another is totally ambiguous. Now it is important to note in this connection the fact that the kind of possibilities James has in mind are not mere logical possibilities, but genuine possibilities which really tempt a man.\(^\text{73}\) Pragmatically, this means possibilities which have consequences for future action. Moreover, the meaning for future action is justified because one feels that the goal is attainable by means of human action.

On the basis of James's conception of the structure of the monistic universe it is understandable why he demands that causality be sacrificed in order to insure freedom. For in a monistic universe things cannot be otherwise. Human action is impotent against such mechanical forces. However, to rid the universe of this notion of causality is one thing; to rid the universe of the causality by means of which human decision has outward effects is quite another thing. Yet this is the effect of James's indifference to the question of agency in action, for it neutralizes human action.

If inward decision is to have outward effects, there must be some way in which the individual can claim or influence one of the possibilities which exist for him. To say that one thing influences another is to say that there is a causal

\(^{73}\) James, *Principles*, II, 576.
relation between them. This, however, is not the kind of causality which James seeks to destroy, for this kind of influence may or may not come to pass, and even the way in which it may come to pass is variable. It is ambiguous before the fact and cannot be deduced a priori, for until the facts of brute experience have been remoulded in terms of the present needs, there is no way of telling what the action will be, since there is no way of telling before the fact what the exact need will be. The source of this kind of free act is the individual who determines that the world of experience is to be remoulded in one way rather than another.

If James's objection to the notion of agent or agency is merely a matter of names, then a solution seems quite simple; change the name but preserve the fact. On the other hand, if James's objection to the notion of agent is based on his refusal to make a metaphysical commitment, then he has neutralized the actions of the very beings whose freedom he was attempting to insure. Causality in the form of human agency is the means by which the world may be changed, and what is yet not present may make its appearance. It is the real source of novelty in the world. Genuine possibilities really tempt a man because there is present within him the existential complement whereby all things in the real world come to be, and by which men exercise power over their own acts and over the world.
To assert as James does that all that is required for human freedom is the existence of possibilities is simply not enough. For it leaves unanswered the question as to the means by which possibilities are reduced to actualities. And in the real world it is actualities and not possibilities that make a difference. Just as it required more than possibility to make the real world, it requires more than possibility to make men free. It is meaningless to grant freedom to men without at the same time granting them the means of exercising it.

It is pragmatic maxim that there is no difference that does not make a difference. No more useful application of this maxim can be found than the question of human freedom. The difference is simply stated: without the means of achieving effects in the world man has no ground for expecting that the future can be better than the past. A possible knife will cut possible bread, but possible bread will not nourish a starving human being. Possibilities only say what can be, deeds make things be. And as far as the real world is concerned, the multiplication of possibilities ad infinitum will never beget one real difference.

In disregarding the notion of agency in human action James has forfeited the only means by which the future can be made to differ from the past. Considering the question in its temporal aspect one might say that the only way the future can differ from the past is on the condition that it is in the
hands of the present there to be moulded according to the needs and intentions of men. Only in this way can one speak of freedom in terms of novelty. And James's notion of freedom under the name of chance, a free gift, coming as it does with no claim made upon it, is a useless gift because it is existentially neutral, i.e., merely possible. To say that the future may differ from the past means, indeed, if it mean anything at all, that there exists in the present moment that which possesses the means of influencing the future course of events. In disregarding agency James has not provided the grounds for the difference between the future and the past. He has forfeited the means of bridging the gap between possibility and actuality.

Thus, James has relinquished the right of expecting that the future should exhibit the slightest modicum of difference from the past. To deny agency is to sever the link between the possible and the actual. When the existence of possibilities becomes the sole criterion for the existence of freedom, one has lost all contact with reality. Possibility is only the halfway house on the road to freedom; over and above this it requires that which is ontologically endowed with the means of exercising its freedom.

All of these difficulties have arisen because James has chosen to ignore the ontological ground of freedom. Yet the meaning of James's notion of freedom is clear in spite of
these difficulties. No solution of the problem of agency will be attempted. Indeed, no solution seems possible since James has expressed indifference to agency in action. But James did not, after all, propose to offer a proof for the existence of human freedom. He merely described the feeling experienced in one’s subjective encounter with the world.

At this point, however, we are confronted with the curious fact that what James’s notion of freedom demands on the practical level cannot receive justification on the theoretic level. The fact of agency in action is precisely the point from which James’s notion of freedom derives its meaning, i.e., a subject in a world, acting in the world, and influencing the world for good or evil. Remove the fact of agency from the concrete life situation and James’s whole notion of freedom becomes meaningless. Yet James will not accept in principle what his notion of freedom requires in practice. Not only is freedom established as it is found in the lived experience, but its whole meaning is confined to that experience. One must not prescind from the actual experience itself and consider abstractly the meaning and, indeed, even the possibility of such an experience. To do so would be to lose contact with freedom in the concrete situation, and we have seen the futility of the debate between determinism and indeterminism. Hence the whole meaning of freedom is to be found in one’s subjective experience on the practical level.
Although James felt that the science of psychology could make no claim on the question, since effort was unmeasurable, he nevertheless stressed the subjective experience of choosing attended with the feeling that more or less effort could be exerted. Psychologically, then, the feeling that one determines the action of the moment is present.

Philosophically, the same experience of choosing provides the most basic sort of evidence for freedom. Such an inward experience involves the feeling that decision has a real outward application. Not only is decision capable of effecting changes in the world, but it is also capable of changing the world for the better. Pragmatically, this means that the notion of freedom has consequences as a guide for future action. And the kind of universe in which it has meaning as a guide for future action is the pluralistic universe. For in this sort of universe possibility forms a part, and it is other than a mockery to feel that one's deeds illuminate historical time.

Therefore, psychologically as well as philosophically, freedom is a meaningful notion on the practical level. The best available evidence in behalf of human freedom lies in the subjective experience of freedom itself. In a pluralistic universe freedom is true, since it is capable of getting into a satisfactory relation with the rest of one's experiences, the experience of choosing, willing, and feeling that one has left the world in a little better condition than the condition
in which one found it. In this sense, freedom is a moral postulate about the kind of world in which one lives. Human decision, then, is the means by which one determines what possibilities are to become actual.

There can be no doubt, then, that James was convinced of the fact of human freedom. James refused to yield to the claims of deterministic monism over human action. Although the difficulty of agency in action has shaken the very ground of freedom, the meaning James wishes to ascribe to freedom is not lost. He has envisaged the whole question on the level of the concrete situation where the individual, or self, is called upon to modify the world of brute experience. On this level, man's volitional nature is responsible for modifying the world. In modifying the world, man is not a mere transfer agency of forces initiated in the remote past; rather, he is a real contributing agency remoulding brute experience according to the needs of the present. At the same time, man builds his own inner self, for man is the author of his own deeds, and these deeds belong to him as his contribution to the world. Man as a self, is a self in relation to the world he has built. Between the world as man finds it, and the world as man leaves it, lies decision. In other words, the modification of the outward world of brute experience is dependent on inward decision. Decision, then, is the subjective creative act by which man constitutes not only the historical development of
the world, but also constitutes himself in relation to the world.

Hence, on the basis of all that has been said, we submit that self-determination, i.e., the ability of the self to determine its own unique relation to the world, is the essential meaning of freedom in the philosophy of William James.
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The thesis submitted by Eugene Lawrence McCarney has been read and approved by three members of the Department of Philosophy.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

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Signature of Adviser