

## William James on Free Will and Determinism

Donald Wayne Viney  
*Pittsburg State University*

James's classic article "The Dilemma of Determinism" represents only an early and partial statement on his views of free will and determinism. James's mature position incorporates the arguments of "The Dilemma of Determinism" into a robust theory of free will which at once explains the operations of free effort and delineates the scope of legitimate psychological explanation. Free will is an issue of fact while being beyond the competence of psychological science.

Over a century has passed since William James published his classic article "The Dilemma of Determinism" (James, 1979a). During this century, psychology, a discipline that James helped found, has been unable to discard the free will/determinism issue. Though there was a lengthy period during the reign of classical behaviorism when it was considered a virtue to be anti-metaphysical, the issue nevertheless persisted to haunt psychologists. In recent years, particularly since the early 1970s, there has been a resurgence of interest in free will and determinism. This resurgence is manifested in a large number of papers devoted to various dimensions of the issue.

The recent literature has, for example, addressed such topics as the conceptual foundations for a belief in free will (Rychlak, 1983), the relationship between beliefs in free will and determinism and beliefs about punishment (Nettler, 1959; Viney, Waldman, and Barchilon, 1982), concepts of free will in modern psychological science (Rychlak, 1979) and the determinants of free will (Easterbrook, 1978). Numerous recent articles in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g., Macklin, 1976; Ross, 1974; Schwartz, 1984; Viney, 1986) have also addressed some meanings of freedom and free will in a psychoanalytic context.

One can only speculate about the reasons for the resurgence of interest in the free will issue. Skinner's (1971) book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* undoubtedly played a role by stirring up interest in free will in both the academic and public communities. Prior to Skinner's book, the Third Force

---

I wish to thank Wayne Viney, Donald Crosby and Michael Wertheimer for many helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. Requests for reprints should be sent to Donald Wayne Viney, Ph.D., Department of Social Science/Philosophy, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas 66762.

Humanistic psychologies were challenging the deterministic psychologies of psychoanalysis and behaviorism. There had also been a groundswell of research on internal versus external locus of control since the publication of Rotter's (1966) scale on that topic. The advent of the new cognitive-affective psychologies may also have contributed to a more tolerant climate for re-exploring the free will/determinism issue.

Whatever the reasons, the literature clearly demonstrates a vital new interest in an old issue. Current literature in psychology vindicates James's claim that it is a "radical mistake" to think that "the juice has ages ago been pressed out of the free will controversy" (James, 1979a, p. 114). Such a circumstance provides a challenge to interested parties to reacquaint themselves with earlier classic approaches to the problem. In the process, we may find "new" and fresh perspectives that are useful in contemporary deliberations. In that spirit, I propose a re-examination of James's position on the freedom of the will.

In my judgement, commentators are often guilty of treating "The Dilemma of Determinism" as if it were James's final pronouncement on the free will issue. While the article is necessary to understanding James's position, it is more an argument against determinism than for free will. James's mature views join the arguments of "The Dilemma of Determinism" to a theory of the will and its relation to the science of psychology. This paper does not treat of James's moral argument against determinism but focuses instead on his positive conception of free will. It is hoped that by clarifying James's views, a largely ignored position will be seen to be more attractive.

### *Free Will and Possibility*

The question of determinism and free will turns, according to James, on the question of possibility. "The question relates solely to the existence of possibilities, in the strict sense of the term, as things that may, but need not be" (James, 1979a, p. 118). Determinists deny that there are any possibilities except the ones that are realized. This is not to say that determinists deny that certain alternative courses of action *seem* equally possible. However, according to determinists, the apparent openness of the future is simply a function of our ignorance of the relevant causal factors determining action.

[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 totaliy. (James, 1979a, p. 117)

The "block universe" of determinism allows for no independence of the will to choose courses of action not previously fixed by the tide of events.

James sometimes speaks of fatality and determinism in one breath. However, he does distinguish these two notions (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1177). Fatalism is the view that the tide of events is too great for any free effort to significantly effect. Freedom *could be* a real factor were it not so puny. The fatalist acknowledges an independent, albeit ineffectual, will. In contrast, determinism claims that all willing or effort is continuous with the course of events. For the determinist, there is no question of lacking the power to alter things; for effort is merely an expression of the world's inner dynamic of necessity.

Opposed to determinism is indeterminism, which says that the parts of the universe

have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous. (James, 1979a, p. 118)

James uses the word "chance" to express the concept of indeterminism. To say that an event occurs by chance says nothing more than that it "is not guaranteed that it may also fall out otherwise" (James, 1979a, p. 120). The indeterministic universe is one in which there is chance, in which possibilities are real, and in which no amount of ideal knowledge could chart the future.

James's indeterminism does not imply that there is no connection between events or that anything, no matter how bizarre, might happen. There is a logical gulf between this anything-can-happen doctrine and James's indeterminism. For James, determinism and indeterminism are contradictories, not contraries. Determinism says that all events are causally necessitated; indeterminism says that some events are not causally necessitated. Indeterminism is *not* the view that no events are causally necessitated.

The confusion of these ideas has been the occasion for a great deal of misunderstanding. Many have argued that the Jamesian doctrine of chance, far from making a place for moral responsibility, actually makes it impossible. In his own day, Georg Von Gizycki (1888) and Shadworth Hodgson (Perry, 1935) criticized James on this account. More recently, Gardner Murphy (1971), Edward Walter and Arthur Minton (1975) have made the same charge. R. E. Hobart (1934), Moritz Schlick (1939) and J. J. C. Smart (1961) argue in a similar fashion, although none mentions James. The objection is that an action which occurs by chance cannot be an action for which one can be held morally responsible. Actions must be determined if talk of responsibility is to make any sense. We are told that in an indeterministic universe, for example, the grocer is as likely to poison the produce as to sell it fresh. In such a world, say the critics, moral categories collapse.

James would have agreed that the kind of world the critic describes is a moral

anarchy. But he would have denied that it is a fair portrayal of an indeterministic universe. In characteristic defiance, James says, "Users of this argument should properly be excluded from debate till they learn what the real question is" (James, 1979a, p. 122). He distinguishes possibilities that really tempt the will and those that do not.

"Free will" does not say that everything that is physically conceivable is also morally possible. It merely says that of alternatives that really *tempt* our will more than one is really possible. (James 1979a, p. 122; 1981, Volume II, p. 1180)

Most grocers are never tempted to poison their produce. Thus, the indeterminist is not obliged to say that such an action is likely. For James, one is free only in relation to those alternatives which are really tempting.

### *Character and Habit*

Unsatisfied with this reply, the determinist may argue that chance, even in James's sense, does not allow for moral responsibility. For if an act is not the expression of one's character it cannot be free in a morally relevant sense. James was unimpressed by this argument. He writes,

Schopenhauer, who enforces his determinism by the argument that with a given fixed character only one reaction is possible under given circumstances, forgets that, in these critical ethical moments, what consciously *seems* to be in question is the complexion of the character itself. The problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become. (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 227)

According to James, we are "habitually fashioning our characters" (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 130). He insists that the pivotal question in this dispute is not whether the self, or character, determines its own actions. Determinism, whether proceeding from within the agent or from without, was distasteful to James. Robert Nozick asks, "is it better to be a hand puppet than a marionette?" (1981, p. 310). James could have asked the same question.

James was profoundly influenced by Jules Lequier for whom freedom was conceived as self-creativity (Brimmer, 1975). For James, the self is in constant flux. Like the process philosophers who followed him, James rejected the idea of an immutable ego undergoing accidental adventures of change (Ford, 1982, chapter 1; James, 1981, Volume I, chapter X). Although it is the whole person who acts, it is a person who, in acting, is partly responsible for creating the self. Again, novelty is the key issue.

As a matter of plain history the only "free will" I have ever thought of defending is the character of novelty in fresh activity-situations. If an activity-process is the form of a whole "field of consciousness," and if each field of consciousness is not only in its totality unique

(as is now commonly admitted) but has its elements unique (since in that situation they are all dyed in the total) then novelty is perpetually entering the world and what happens there is not pure *repetition*, as the dogma of literal uniformity of nature requires. Activity-situations come, in short, each with an original touch. (James, 1976, p. 93)

The fresh activity-situations of one's conscious life grow out of a settled past. Thus, one's will is tempted only by a limited range of alternatives. But if the will is free, then, according to James, it is not settled in advance which of the alternatives we find attractive will be chosen.

In his discussion of habit, James emphasizes the importance that decisions have in fashioning character.

We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never so little scar. (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 130)

Once accomplished, a deed leaves its mark on our character, helping to create who we are. The more consistently we act, the more consistent our character becomes, until it "has set like plaster, and will never soften again" (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 126). James acknowledges that character plays a role in determining behavior. However, the character itself is in part the result of "individual reality and creative power" (James, 1920, p. 148). He was the first to agree that we are creatures of habit; but he added the footnote that habits, in humans at least, are not immutable, and that the initiation of novel patterns of behavior is a genuine possibility (cf. James, 1981, Volume I, p. 109).

### *Consciousness*

If persons can form new habits, and if the process involves what James calls chance, the critic may yet contend that we are a long way from a meaningful concept of free will. The gradual formation of character may be a reality, but if not directed by consciousness, it is but a shadow of morally responsible activity. It is a fair question whether James does not underemphasize the importance of consciousness for free will and by implication, for moral responsibility. Repeatedly he ignores the question of consciousness in his direct dealings with free will. Free will, he says, "means novelty, the grafting on to the past of something not involved therein" (James, 1975, p. 59). Or again, free will "means *nothing but* real novelty" [emphasis mine] (James, 1979b, p. 73). His most famous statement on free will, "The Dilemma of Determinism," says not a word about consciousness. It would be a mistake, however, to think that James undervalued the bearing consciousness has on the free will question. Both his aversion to epiphenomenalism and his view of will as a function of attention attest to the importance James gave consciousness.

*Epiphenomenalism.* Thomas Huxley, Shadworth Hodgson, Théodule Ribot, and George Santayana (James's student) were epiphenomenalists.

Epiphenomenalism is the view that consciousness is produced by, and accompanies, neural activity, but is itself causally impotent. In simpler terms, consciousness is an idle wheel, "a lyric cry in the midst of business," in Santayana's words (Shaffer, 1968, p. 70). James refers to epiphenomenalism as the automaton theory (James, 1981, Volume I, chapter V). Although he acknowledges that there are strong arguments for the automaton theory, he rejects them all. "It is quite inconceivable that consciousness should have *nothing to do* with a business which it so faithfully attends" (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 140). James builds an empirical case for the efficacy of consciousness. Rejecting the idea that consciousness is primarily cognitive, James describes it as a "*fighter for ends*," indispensable in our evolutionary struggle for survival (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 143). The complexity of the human nervous system gives it the potential to adapt to a variety of changes in the environment. The trade-off for such complexity is that there are more chances for the equilibrium of the organism to be upset in directions unfavorable for survival.

In short, a high brain may do many things, and may do each of them at a very slight hint. But its hair-trigger organization makes it a happy-go-lucky, hit-or-miss affair. It is as likely to do the crazy as the sane thing at any given moment. A low brain does few things, and in doing them perfectly forfeits all other use. (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 143)

The function of consciousness is to intervene and inhibit those responses which tend to threaten the organism. Consciousness is evolutionarily adaptive.

James marshalls other bits of evidence which corroborate his theory. Consciousness, he says, is "only intense when nerve processes are hesitant" (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 145). Well ingrained habitual behaviors require a minimum of conscious attention. Other supporting evidence is drawn from the phenomenon of vicarious function. A damaged brain is capable of gradually restoring many of its lost functions. James believes that the directing activity of consciousness at least partially explains this phenomenon. Finally, he notes that since pleasures and pains are usually associated respectively with beneficial and detrimental experiences, they are ideally suited to aid in our survival. These considerations lead James to reject epiphenomenalism in favor of the view that consciousness is a real factor in the shaping of events. For James, the function of consciousness is to steer "a nervous system grown too complex to regulate itself" (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 147).

*Effort and attention.* According to Kuklick, James's argument for the efficacy of consciousness is "his central argument for the will's freedom . . ." (1977, p. 170). While this claim does not square with James's denial that empirical evidence can decide the free will question, it is true that consciousness plays a pivotal role in his theory of the will. James had originally accepted Charles

Renouvier's definition of free will—"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts" (James, H., 1920, p. 147). This definition contains all the rudiments of James's mature view on the freedom of the will. The components of an act of will, according to James, are effort and attention, "two names for the same psychic fact" (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 130). He writes,

... attention with effort is all that any case of volition implies. The essential achievement of will, in short, when it is most "voluntary," is to ATTEND to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind. (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1166)

Or again, "Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of will" (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1167). Attention, however is manifestly an achievement of consciousness. Thus, embedded in his theory of the will is the idea of consciousness.

The element of conscious attention, of holding an idea before the mind, is especially apparent in some weighty moral decisions. Such actions require taking the line of the greatest resistance. The moral agent is confronted with a "sensual propensity" to act in one way, contrasted with an ideal of right action. To act in accordance with the ideal is to resist what comes easiest. James illustrates the point with the following diagram (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1155).

$$I \text{ per se} < P.$$

$$I + E > P.$$

I is the ideal, P is the propensity and E is the effort, or component of will. All things being equal, the propensity is stronger than the ideal. Sufficient effort, however, can tip the scales against the propensity.

James is offering nothing more than a descriptive psychological analysis of the will. His aim is only to describe the facts as they appear. James fully acknowledges that things may not be as they seem. The amount of effort a person gives to an idea may be strictly determined by causal antecedents. If so, then the feeling that we *might have* exerted more effort in a given situation is an illusion, a function of our ignorance of the relevant causal factors. This is the axis on which the question of the will's freedom turns.

*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 a fixed function of the object, or are they not?* (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1175)

When, therefore, James speaks of consciousness as a selective agency or of the

mind as a theatre of simultaneous possibilities (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 277) he is not begging the question against the determinist. The appearance may be deceiving, the sense that “things are *really being decided* from one moment to another” may be an illusion and our voluntary life be nothing more than “the dull rattling off of a chain that was forged innumerable ages ago” (James, 1981, Volume I, p. 429).

### *Free Will and Science*

As already noted, James insists that the free will issue cannot be settled on empirical or scientific grounds. In “The Dilemma of Determinism” he argues that science deals with facts, not possibilities—but the question of free will is one of possibilities (James, 1979a, p. 119). In the *Principles of Psychology* he refines the argument further. For all practical purposes, our psychological knowledge could never be great enough, nor our instruments sensitive enough to permit answering the free will question. To tell whether a greater amount of attention could have been given to an idea, it would be necessary, argues James,

to ascend to the antecedents of the effort, and defining them with mathematical exactitude, prove, by laws of which we have not at present even an inkling, that the amount of sequent effort which could possibly comport with them was the precise amount which actually came. (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1176)

These kinds of measurements, he says, “will surely be forever beyond human reach” (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1176). It is in this spirit that James’s remark that “there is no such thing as a science of psychology” should be understood (James, 1920, p. 294). Psychology cannot be a science in the way physics is a science. As James says,

However closely psychical changes may conform to law, it is safe to say that individual histories and biographies will never be written in advance no matter how “evolved” psychology may become. (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1179)

For James, psychology can never prove whether, at any given moment, more effort of attention might have been achieved.

How then is the psychologist to treat the free will problem? For all practical purposes, says James, psychology can assume the truth of determinism. Psychology, he says,

must deal with the *general laws* of volition exclusively; with the impulse and inhibitory character of ideas; with the nature of their appeals to the attention; with the conditions under which effort may arise, etc.; but not with the precise amounts of effort, for these, if our wills be free, are impossible to compute. She thus abstracts from free will, without necessarily denying its existence. (James, 1892, p. 398)



Gordon Allport calls this a “singularly lame” position, since, if freedom is a fact, psychology “must of necessity give a distorted view of human conduct” (1943, p. 180). For James, however, the psychologist’s view is not so much distorted as limited. This is the case whether free will is true or not. On James’s account, even if one is a determinist, it is *practically* impossible to calculate the minute changes in attention. James would have felt that the only distorted view is the one which, at once, pretends to be scientific, yet leaps beyond the empirical evidence to pronounce that our wills are unfree.

If James is correct, then, from an empirical standpoint, and so far as human decisions are concerned, a deterministic universe should be indistinguishable from an indeterministic one. This is, in fact, James’s position. To illustrate his point, he imagines himself faced with the choice of walking home by way of Divinity Avenue or Oxford Street, and asks us to suppose that the ambiguity of his choice is real—in other words, that indeterminism is true. This means that, even if Divinity Avenue is chosen, Oxford Street *could* have been chosen. If *per impossible*, the clock were turned back to the moment of decision, and all antecedent causal factors were the same, Oxford Street being chosen would cause no perceivable disruption in the course of events. The determinist believes that only one of the chosen alternatives is consistent with previous events. But, chides James, this is “mere conception fulminated as a dogma and based on no insight into details” (James, 1979a, p. 122). And the details are, as we have seen, precisely where James believes the free will issue rests.

... [T]he operation of free effort, if it existed, could only be to hold some one ideal object, or part of an object, a little longer or a little more intensely before the mind. (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1179)

Considered from the empirical point of view, “it would be an operation amongst those physiological infinitesimals which calculation must forever neglect” (James, 1981, Volume II, p. 1180). We are left to decide the question of free will on other grounds.

A common misunderstanding of James’s Oxford Street/Divinity Avenue thought experiment is that it is used as an example to “demonstrate the probability of indeterminism” (Thiroux, 1985, p. 144; Walter, 1977). However, it should be clear that James has no intention of offering empirical evidence for indeterminism. He explicitly denies that his example was meant to be an argument for chance (James, 1979a, p. 124). The point of the example is that at a practical level, and so far as observation is concerned, a deterministic and an indeterministic universe are indistinguishable. Thereby, the thought experiment serves two purposes: first, to demonstrate that indeterminism does not render the universe an “insane sand-heap,” in which anything is likely to happen; second, to illustrate that the free will problem, as James conceives it, is a question of details that falls outside the parameters of scientific investigation.

In arguing that science is incapable of deciding the free will question, James clears the way for his moral argument against determinism.

James says that, for purposes of research, psychology may assume that determinism is true. Thus, he does not prohibit the use of determinism as a methodological or heuristic principle. However, if James is correct that a deterministic and indeterministic universe are indistinguishable at a practical level, then psychology would have no need of determinism even as a methodological principle. As James says, psychology deals with the "general laws" of volition. To conceive of these laws as deterministic, or as representing an absolute order among events, is unnecessary so far as psychology is concerned. A considerable degree of order there must be to insure law-like relations; but the postulate of absolute uniformity is a superfluity.

### Conclusion

B. F. Skinner believes that the doctrine of free will has become otiose, a mere curiosity, like phlogiston in physics (1976, p. 21). Those informed by a Jamesian spirit would ask whether psychology could not be better served by being weaned from the notion that all human phenomena must be subsumed under deterministic laws if they are to be intelligible. By providing a theory of the will's operations and clarifying the limits of psychological explanation, James demonstrates that free will may figure in our assessment of human beings without undermining the science of human behavior.

### References

- Allport, G. (1943). The productive paradoxes of William James. *Psychological Review*, 50, 95-120.
- Brimmer, H. H. (1975). Jules Lequier and process philosophy (Doctoral dissertation, Emory University, 1975). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 36, 2892A.
- Easterbrook, J. A. (1978). *The determinants of free will*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ford, M. P. (1982). *William James's philosophy: A new perspective*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hobart, R. E. (1934). Free will as involving determination and inconceivable without it. *Mind*, 43, 1-27.
- James, H. (Editor) (1920). *The letters of William James* (Volumes I and II). Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- James, W. (1892). *Psychology: Briefer course*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- James, W. (1975). *Pragmatism*. F. Bowers, and I. K. Skrupskelis (Editors). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1976). *Essays in radical empiricism*. F. Bowers, and I. K. Skrupskelis (Editors). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1979a). *The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy*. F. H. Burkhardt, F. Bowers, and I. K. Skrupskelis (Editors). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

- James, W. (1979b). *Some problems of philosophy: A beginning of an introduction to philosophy*. F. H. Burkhardt, F. Bowers, and I. K. Skrupskelis (Editors). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1981). *The principles of psychology* (Volumes I and II). F. Burkhardt, and F. Bowers (Editors). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Kuklick, B. (1977). *The rise of American philosophy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Macklin, R. (1976). A psychoanalytic model for human freedom and rationality. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 45, 430-454.
- Murphy, G. (1971). William James on the will. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 7, 249-260.
- Nettler, G. (1959). Cruelty, dignity, and determinism. *American Sociological Review* 24, 375-384.
- Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical explanations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Perry, R. B. (1935). *The thought and character of William James* (Volumes I and II). Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Ross, N. (1974). Man's struggle for freedom. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 38, 209-221.
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80, (whole number 609).
- Rychlak, J. F. (1979). *Discovering free will and personal responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rychlak, J. F. (1983). Can psychology be objective about free will? *New Ideas in Psychology*, 1, 213-229.
- Schlick, M. (1939). *Problems of ethics*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Schwartz, W. (1984). The two concepts of action and responsibility in psychoanalysis. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 32, 557-572.
- Shaffer, J. A. (1968). *Philosophy of mind*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Skinner, B. F. (1971). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Skinner, B. F. (1976). *About behaviorism*. New York: Vintage.
- Smart, J. J. C. (1961). Free will, praise and blame. *Mind*, 70, 291-306.
- Thiroux, J. (1985). *Philosophy—theory and practice*. New York: Macmillan.
- Viney, W. (1986). *Determinism and freedom in Freud's psychoanalytic thought*. Paper presented at Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, Denver, Colorado.
- Viney, W., Waldman, D. A., and Barchilon, J. (1982). Attitudes toward punishment in relation to beliefs in free will and determinism. *Human Relations*, 35, 939-950.
- Von Gizycki, G. (1888). Determinism versus indeterminism: An answer to William James. *The Open Court*, 1, 729-734, 758-762.
- Walter, E. (1977). William James's chance. *Midwestern Journal of Philosophy*, 5, 51-59.
- Walter, E., and Minton, A. (1975). Soft determinism, freedom, and rationality. *Personalist*, 56, 364-384.