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1

Determinism and Despair

The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact.

—William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1903

IN A CERTAIN SENSE, the way that we take in life is determined without our permission. No one asks us if we would like to be born or if we might like to grow up in this family rather than that one. One's race, sex, socioeconomic condition, and health are factors that are largely accidental. We are, in the words of the twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, "thrown" into the world, set adrift, and, through much of adolescence, live at the mercy of forces beyond our control.

For many people, adulthood does not free them from these circumstances. “Despite preconceptions that suicide is more prevalent in high-income countries,” the World Health Organization states, “in reality, 75 percent of suicides [worldwide] occur in low- and middle-income countries.” This statistic is, I assume, a function of being delivered into an intolerable situation and, in the end, refusing to tolerate it. Of course, if fate smiles upon us, the forces are benign and we are not born into abject poverty, but even the most benign forces can eventually cause one to flounder.¹

William James, ostensibly, was a very lucky one. Born in 1842 in New York City, James grew up in a household supported by old money—lots of it—with a father, Henry James Sr., who doted on his children. James was indulged, but not in the ways we usually expect.

In 1832, Henry Sr. had inherited the better part of a million dollars, a vast sum in those days, from his father who had headed a banking and real estate empire in upstate New York. Henry Sr., however, was not going to go into the family business in Albany. Not even close. Now that he was independently wealthy, Henry turned away from worldly pursuits altogether, dedicating himself to the study of religion, philosophy, and the natural sciences.

When his eldest son, William, was born, Henry Sr. was in the midst of making his final break with the modern, materialistic rat race, but also with his own father's strict Calvinism that had kept everything in frantic motion. Calvinism, you see, is a religion of obedience and absolute control, God's control. Humans are either blessed, and therefore "elected" to heaven, or cursed, and therefore damned to hell. But there's no tried-and-true way of knowing what type of person you are. One thing is certain, however: you aren't in control of your destiny. In 1844, when William was two, Henry Sr. explained:

I had . . . been in the habit of ascribing to the Creator, so far as my life and actions are concerned, an outside discernment of the most jealous scrutiny, and had accordingly put the greatest possible alertness into his service and worship, until my will, as you have seen—thoroughly fagged out as it were with the formal, endless, heartless task of conciliating a stony-hearted Deity—actually collapsed.²

For James the elder, Calvinism set out an impossible task: to exercise the human will freely, meaningfully, in order to satisfy a God who was both omnipotent and infinitely removed. Pursuing this task led Henry Sr. into what he would later term a "vastation," from the Latin *vastare*, meaning "to lay to waste"—a state of

utter spiritual and personal desolation. One was supposed to act as though one's actions mattered in some moral and existential sense, but the conditions of God's divine design suggested that they amounted to pitifully little. God might have a plan, but the evils of human existence remain.

Henry eventually escaped his "vastation" through the mystical training of an eighteenth-century Lutheran mystic named Emanuel Swedenborg. In reading Swedenborg, Henry achieved an "emancipated condition" and his spirit was "lifted by a sudden miracle into felt harmony with universal . . . and indestructible life."³ The religious crisis that Henry James experienced in the early 1840s set the rules of engagement for the household in which William James would be raised. Freedom: that was the enduring touchstone that guided family life. William, along with his precocious brother and sister, Henry and Alice, were given free rein to play, study, read, travel—do whatever—as they liked. The only thing that was not permitted was limiting these brilliant children's possibilities. Even Wilkinson and Robertson, the two James brothers whom their father did not single out for intellectual greatness, were given a generous leash.

There was some method, even a beautiful one, behind the father's madness. He believed that the point of life wasn't merely to make a living, to assume

some narrowly circumscribed task and do it repeatedly day after day. It wasn't about making money or punching a clock. Instead, the objective of human existence was to cultivate good character. "And in as much," Henry Sr. wrote of raising a son, "as I know that this character cannot be forcibly imposed on him, but must be freely assumed, I surround him as far as possible with an atmosphere of freedom."⁴

William James grew up, as one might expect of a boy charged with the task of being free, on the move: Paris, Rouen, Kent, and London by the age of two; Albany at four; New York City at five. In 1855, his father concluded that the educational system of the New York elite was far too constrictive for a ten-year-old, so off the family went again: back to Paris, then on to Lyon, Geneva, and finally to Boulogne-sur-Mer on the French side of the English Channel.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of Henry James Sr.'s closest friends, suggested that "traveling is a fool's paradise," but it worked rather well in the upbringing of William James, at least for a time. His father hoped that his children would simply "be somewhere—almost anywhere would do—and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or vibration."⁵ That was enough. James's formal education was anything but formal, a by-product of happenstance, or better, exposure—James was exposed to

the world, encouraged to experience its riches often and its deficiencies occasionally, and to experiment with its natural and cultural offerings. In truth, his father hoped that his son would experiment with himself—hypothesize, test, and observe what a young man might become.

When the teenaged James dedicated himself to one experiment at the expense of others, however, his father was quick to warn him against narrowing his scope prematurely. This seems to have been the case in 1860 when the James family uprooted again, traveling to Newport, Rhode Island, so William could study painting with William Hunt, arguably the most talented American portraitist of the day. Henry Sr. initially supported his son's enthusiasm, but reminded him that this vocation, even such a pointedly unconventional one, could have the effect of stifling his personal growth. Despite the freewheeling atmosphere of his childhood, William's father had still always known best, but on this occasion met with resistance: "I do not see why man's spiritual culture," William wrote to his father in August of 1860, "should not go on independently of his aesthetic activity, why the power an artist feels in himself should tempt him to forget what he is, any more than the power felt by Cuvier or Fourier would tempt them to do the same."⁶

Despite this protest, James's foray into professional painting lasted but a year. Did he discover that his sense of perfectionism outstripped his technical artistic skill? Probably. Did his father's disapproval also wear down his resolve? Definitely. In any event, in 1861 James left Newport, assuming an intellectual bearing that he would keep, more or less consistently, for the rest of his life: William James was bound for science. His comment regarding Cuvier and Fourier—the biologist and physicist par excellence—would be a harbinger of James's persistent attempt to join Asa Gray, Louis Agassiz, and Benjamin Peirce as an American man of science. Henry James Sr. was more satisfied with this course of action. *Scientia*—knowledge—would set his son free.



If this sounds like the opening pages of a story about a poor little rich boy, it is. At least it is in part. James was given every possible opportunity to flourish and be shielded from the world's harsher realities. He was, in the simplest possible terms, spoiled.

There are, however, reasons to forbear this story. James's pampered adolescence and subsequent disillusionment mirror, with disturbing fidelity, the psychic fracturing that has come to define many lives of

contemporary privilege. I'm not just talking about the Kate Spades, Margot Kidders, and Anthony Bourdains of the world—although their suicides stand as dramatic and especially tragic recent cases—but rather anyone who has ever had enough free time on his or her hands to consider the possibility that life might actually be wholly meaningless. Thomas Hobbes might be right that leisure is the mother of philosophy, but leisure also, for many people, spawns morbid depression. It is as if only after a person has been given everything that one has the chance to realize that everything might never be enough to really matter. It only takes a minor disturbance in the comforts of daily life—just a persistent irritation in an otherwise perfect existence—to bring on this dark realization. At that point, in the words of the twentieth-century French thinker Albert Camus, “the stage sets collapse.”⁷ For William James, this began to occur in the spring of 1862.

This was the year in which William Morris Hunt, James's onetime painting instructor, painted *The Drummer Boy*. Against a darkening sky, a young boy, maybe ten years old, stands alone on a pedestal, alone save for the massive marching drum that he carries, his arm raised to the clouds ready to sound the call to arms. On the pedestal is a simple statement, an imperative for all able-bodied men: “U. S. Volunteers.”

With the election of Abraham Lincoln, the Southern states had seceded, and the Civil War intensified.

Garth Wilkinson “Wilkie” James responded to the Drummer Boy’s command immediately, enlisting in 1862 at the age of seventeen. “When I went to war I was a boy of 17 years of age, the son of parents devoted to the cause of the Union and the abolition of slavery,” Wilkinson would later remember. “I had been brought up in the belief that slavery was a monstrous wrong, its destruction worthy of a man’s best efforts, even unto the laying down of life.”⁸ He almost laid down his own in 1863 at the Battle of Fort Wagner, sustaining wounds from which he would never fully recover. Robertson James regarded his brother’s injury as all the more reason to enter the fight in February of 1864.

But where was William James? He was of fighting age when the confrontation broke out, older than both his brothers. He too grew up in a household that abhorred slavery and enshrined the right to freedom. He too should have been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the Union cause. He might have been willing. But was he able? James never enlisted. He was his father’s chosen boy, but also a rather sickly young man with bad eyesight. He stood on the sidelines as his younger brothers became real heroes, or, in the eyes of the nation, real men. Ralph Barton Perry,

James's student and his most charitable biographer, concludes, "I can see in William James no evidence whatever of his having entered manhood in the decade of the 1860s."⁹

Louis Menand argues that the Civil War set the context for James's philosophical studies: the devastation of a conflict, motivated by grand ideological visions, convinced James and his fellow pragmatists to fashion a philosophy of modest, testable beliefs and goals.¹⁰ I tend to think that the Civil War affected James's outlook in a more immediate and jarring way. To watch relatively helplessly as loved ones go off to war, to witness the fragile inevitabilities of human existence, to experience impotence and stifled ambition—this was James's first intimation that he, along with the rest of the universe, was not free but rather fated.

Given the James family's near-obsession with liberty, William was almost destined to eventually feel himself thoroughly stuck. The young man's entire life had been premised on the expectation that he could exercise his free will. It was only a matter of time before he discovered that he couldn't. In the year before Wilkinson enlisted, James enrolled in Lawrence Scientific School, hoping to make his mark in chemistry, and then in physiology, but it could not have been without the sense that he was not man enough to make a

real mark in the war that enveloped the nation. More than forty years later, James was still anxious to cultivate the martial spirit that he couldn't muster in his youth. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," delivered in 1906, James maintains that "militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible. Without risks or prizes for the darer, history would be insipid indeed."¹¹

There were no meaningful "prizes for the darer" at Lawrence Scientific School. Here, James was drawn to what his teacher Charles William Eliot would call "unsystematic excursions"¹² in chemistry (James had always enjoyed ingesting the potions that he routinely made in his boyhood labs), but most of these experiments proved unfulfilling. They were, at best, a mere playing at the edges of the real world. And James, I think, knew it. Giving up chemistry, which he came to hate, and turning to biology, James began to feel the allure of what is left behind after meaning and passion run dry: money. "I feel very much the importance of making soon a final choice of my business in life," James admitted to his mother in November of 1863. Continuing, James wrote, "I stand now at the place where the road forks. One branch leads to material comfort, the fleshpots, but it seems kind of like selling one's soul. The other to mental dignity and

independence; combined however with physical penury.” It was a decision between business, the life of the nine-to-five, and pure science, the life of knowledge. James would split the difference and try to become a doctor, but it was, I can only imagine, a half-hearted choice. The war continued to rage and James was not in it.¹³



Many people struggle with the decision of whether to sell their souls. They can get a good price, but the opportunity costs seem awfully high. Awfully. James knew this. “The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word ‘success’—is our national disease,” James wrote in later life.¹⁴ The disease progresses so slowly and steadily, victims often don’t even know they’re sick. That is, until they reach the end of life and realize that they have been mortally ill for as long as they can remember. At that point, there is no antidote, no cure, no respite. Just death. And regret.

Of course, it is very difficult to see the problem of working hard in order to live in the lap of luxury, in the “fleshpots” as James describes it. Everything seems so happily habitual and routine, comfortable even in

the drudgery. Eventually, with any luck, you don't even have to toil. The money you once saved now actually makes more money. Everything is accomplished by way of a strange word called "interest." You don't even have to think about it. There is no problem with the fleshpots, save perhaps one. As James deliberated about his future, he was reading the works of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who put his finger on it: "[I]f all wishes were fulfilled as soon as they arose, how would men occupy their lives? What would they do with their time? If the world were a paradise of luxury and ease, a land flowing with milk and honey, where every Jack obtained his Jill at once and without any difficulty, men would either die of boredom or hang themselves."¹⁵ Schopenhauer suspected that in the absence of genuine hardship some individuals would fabricate it—they would pointedly seek out danger and discomfort—for no other reason than to escape ennui. James was one of them.

In 1865, James interrupted his medical studies to join Louis Agassiz's expedition to the Amazon. He wasn't healthy enough to fight, but he could still travel. Agassiz was one of James's teachers at Lawrence Scientific School and the preeminent zoologist and geologist in America. James's voyage to South America was made under the pretense of his interest

in the biological sciences, but it scarcely masked the twenty-three-year-old's thrill seeking. This, however, might make the trip sound more superficial than it was. According to James, before the journey he said to himself, "W. J., in this excursion you will learn to know yourself and your resources somewhat more intimately than you do now, and will come back with your character considerably evolved and established."¹⁶ This was meant to be a voyage of self-discovery, but like most trips of this sort James discovered more than he anticipated.

James was obviously looking for a bit of a challenge, something out of the ordinary. His student and friend Ella Lyman Cabot would later make the distinction between drudgery, which is simply monotony, and meaningful work, which involves attention, exertion, and experience. James was after meaningful work. He also, furtively, wanted to confront the existential terror that many men of his day had grappled with in war.

On his way to the Amazon, James wrote to his parents from Rio de Janeiro, rejoicing that "the horrors of this trip will [soon] be over." The description of the difficult voyage, however, was not without a sense of profound accomplishment: "O the vile sea! The damned Deep! No one has the right to write about the 'nature of Evil' or to have any opinion about evil,

who has not been to sea.” Really? His younger brother had been mowed down by cannon fire and nearly killed. He didn’t have the right to write about evil? No, only the dilettante sailor has that right. James was now one of these rare hardy men. He’d met the sea in battle and won, writing that “the awful slough of despond into which you are there plunged furnishes too profound an experience not to be a fruitful one. I cannot say yet what the fruit is in my case, but I am sure some day an accession of wisdom from it.”¹⁷

This was, at best, false bravado, the posturing of a young man who was trying to get ahold of himself. This is not unlike Goethe’s Faust (one of James’s favorite characters) craving the depths of experience, summoning the sublime Earth Spirit, and then promptly cowering before it. The world was simply too much for him. In the end, James was not robust enough to be an explorer: back pains, stomach flu, temporary blindness, anxiety, and depression forced him to truncate his adventure. The trip to Brazil, and James’s mid-twenties on the whole, can be described as his recurrent failure to control his health and circumstances. His free will—the personal volition that had been preened and protected by his father—just wasn’t up to the task.

Chronic illness, physical and psychological, is not unlike the sea. Seemingly limitless and unpredictable,

completely indifferent to human plans and desires, there is little hope of counteracting it. And it takes a person down. Once under water, the very attempt to stay alive—the act of inhaling—hastens one’s rapid demise. If James learned something on Agassiz’s expedition, it was that human life, despite our best attempts to transcend our natural circumstance or brute animality, is governed, almost exclusively, by physical forces beyond our understanding and control.

In 1866, after returning to Boston and resuming medical school, James began a meticulous study of Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic. James only read two or three pages a day. The Stoic’s message is, I will admit, somewhat difficult to digest. According to “Mark,” as James fondly calls him, human beings consist of three parts: a “little flesh,” “some breath,” and something called “the ruling part.” The first two of these are fragile and transitory: our body and breath come and go quickly, in a tragically disgusting fashion. At the end of the existential day, we are a bunch of meat sacks destined for the grinder. After confronting the force of the ocean and profound sickness, James knew this all too well. The “ruling part,” however, sometimes translated as “reason,” is the coping mechanism to deal with the tragedy of the human condition. The controlling part can face the nastiness of human finitude and bring our life into tune with any brutal

reality. This isn't just a grin-and-bear-it philosophy, as Stoicism is often described, but rather an attempt to harmonize one's life with the cruel necessities of nature. As one becomes an adult, it is best to come to terms with gray hair, disease, and death. It's going to happen anyway.

In June of 1866, James wrote to his younger friend Thomas Ward, who recently had suffered from a bout of ill health. Urging him to take up Marcus Aurelius, James advises,

It seems to me that any man who can, like him, grasp the love of a "life according to nature" i.e. a life in which your individual will becomes so harmonized to nature's will as cheerfully to acquiesce in whatever she assigns to you, know that you serve some purpose in her vast machinery which will never be revealed to you—any man who can do this will, I say, be a pleasing spectacle, no matter what his lot in life.¹⁸

In other words, everything can be stripped from a person except his or her free response to the horrible situation into which he or she has been thrown. That was the Stoic hope, one that James recommended to his friend Ward.

There was, however, a small problem with James becoming a Stoic. Stoicism was well fitted to the partic-

ular spiritual mind-set of Marcus Aurelius's Imperial Rome and also to Christianity, which arose in its wake. But it wasn't particularly suited to the perspective of modern science.

Stoicism turns on the presumption that there are two constitutive elements of every person: the bodily self that is subject to natural laws and the "ruling" spiritual self (a soul) that can determine its orientation to the workings of nature. While the bodily self is definitely not free, this "ruling part" is more or less at liberty to choose how to respond to its highly unfortunate circumstances. In the late 1860s, James came of age in an intellectual culture that began to question the religious framework that supported this dual vision of personhood. What if there were no such thing as a soul? What then of the "ruling part" that was so important to the Stoic?

As James extended his studies of the natural sciences, particularly biology and physiology, he began to encounter thinkers who held that human beings were a "little flesh" and "some breath"—but that was *all*. In that case, life was fully determined by nature and suffered as one long, senseless tragedy. This thought was the seed that ultimately grew into what James would later term the "dilemma of determinism." For James, in the late 1860s, it became a life-threatening crisis.



The idea of determinism, generally speaking, arises in the following way. Imagine you are asked a seemingly innocuous question: “Do you believe in science?” James certainly did, so let’s assume you do too. Now, if you believe in science, you probably also believe in causation, the principle that the events and occurrences in the world can be traced to certain causes that bring them about. There are rational but also very personal reasons to grant causation. The principle allows people to make sense of the change they see in the world, but also to hold that their actions can effect some change.

If you don’t accept causation—the basics of cause and effect—you are basically saying that the universe is just a chaotic mess. So let’s say you endorse some form of causation. And just for the sake of argument, let’s assume you also accept a very basic philosophical position called the “principle of sufficient reason,” which states that everything that exists has a reason for being and being as it is, and not otherwise. That makes pretty good sense, right? It just means that *in principle* everything can be explained in terms of its causes.

We can see the principle of sufficient reason at work in our understanding of the natural world in a fairly

obvious and uncontroversial way. If we want to know how the vessels in Agassiz's expedition reached Brazil, we can give a very detailed description of fluid dynamics, propulsion, wind currents, water currents, and the like to explain their movement—how they went from here to there governed by certain natural laws. Natural objects don't just have one or two causes, but rather an indefinite series of causes that account for their existence and position in the world.

Follow this train of thought far enough and you'll arrive at determinism, which holds that given the state of affairs at any point in time, the way things go thereafter is determined, or fixed, in accord with natural law. It has always been this way, and it always will be. James described the determinist's position in 1884:

It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning.¹⁹

At first glance, this might seem like a rather boring discussion in the history of Western philosophy. And for almost two millennia—from the rise of Christianity to 1800—it pretty much was. So things have causes? So what. Humans are different than things: they have souls and minds and free will and can do as they please. But then, in the 1860s, just as James ventured earnestly into philosophy, the terms of the discussion changed, and the debate surrounding determinism became very interesting and equally disturbing.

With the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, a heretical idea gained significant traction in the philosophical communities of Europe and the United States: human beings were just animals—extremely smart animals maybe, but still just animals. Darwin avoided making this conclusion explicit, but it was, many theorists believed, a necessary implication of his theory of evolution. At the very least, in the wake of Darwin, one had to figure out what his theory meant and where it ultimately led. In 1911, James's friend and colleague Josiah Royce reflected that James had led a group of thinkers—what he called the “second generation” of evolutionary theorists—in extending and evaluating a genuinely new way to understand human nature.²⁰

Thomas Huxley, the boldest of Darwin's defenders and an expert in comparative anatomy, published

Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature in 1863 and in it outlined the close relationship between human beings and apes. Previous generations of philosophers had the luxury of thinking that nonhuman animals might be fully controlled by the laws of nature but that humans were somehow different, somehow free. Huxley disabused his readers of this notion.

In 1865, the twenty-three-year-old William James published his first review in the *North American Review* on Huxley's *Lectures on the Elements of Comparative Anatomy*. James admired Huxley's courage in standing by the facts of science, lauding him for maintaining "the view of the phenomena of life (including human life) which makes them result from the general laws of matter, rather than from the subordination of those laws to some principle of individuality, different in each case." In other words, James couldn't argue with Huxley for believing that human beings, like other animals, were governed by natural law. Like Huxley, James supported the Darwinian hypothesis, but this didn't mean that James wasn't also terrified by its implications. Huxley's view, according to James, was "hypothetically at least, atheistic in its tendency, and, as such, its progress causes much alarm to many excellent people."²¹ There was something, however, even more alarming for James: Huxley's materialism teetered on the edge of causal determinism

and jeopardized free will. And this shook young James to the core. He had to figure out how human freedom could coincide with the findings of evolutionary theory, which seemed largely indisputable.



In the mid-1860s, James was easily shaken. He took another hiatus from medical school in 1867, but this time not with an eye to adventure seeking. James's health had declined dramatically, and now partial blindness, headaches, and nausea made studying impossible. Mysterious weakness of the back, what James called his "dorsal condition," often prevented the twenty-five-year-old from sitting upright or walking. He was immobile, stuck, incapacitated—thoroughly unfree.

With the blessing of his father, James left for Germany, with the peripheral intention of working in its famed physiology laboratories, but primarily in the hope that he would find some physical relief at the spas outside of Berlin. By September, however, James wrote to Henry James Sr. from Dresden that the water treatments of the area had been ineffectual: he was contemplating suicide, admitting, "the thoughts of the pistol, the dagger and the bowl began to usurp an unduly large part of my attention, and I began to think

that some change, even if a hazardous one, was necessary.”²²

Better to change, even in dangerous and self-destructive ways, than to languish in inactivity. At least killing yourself was a definitive action—something James could actually *do*—compared to the doldrums of passivity. Schopenhauer lingered in the background of James’s thoughts, reminding a reader, “They tell us that suicide is the greatest piece of cowardice . . . that suicide is wrong; when it is quite obvious that there is nothing in the world to which every man has a more unassailable title than to his own life and person.”²³ Suicide can be regarded not as a letting go, but rather a laying claim to a life that is otherwise out of control. Control: that is what James wanted. He craved a sense that his will had some, even a little, causal efficacy. And so James considered taking control of death, the seemingly most necessary aspect of life, the stupid punch line of this pathetic joke, the part of human existence that seems destined from the start.

According to the *DSM-5*, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, suicidal ideations are a sure sign of a mental disorder. A contemporary of James’s, Friedrich Nietzsche, would have disagreed. The thoughts of suicide—thinking carefully about its possibility and meaning—are, for some people, a way

of escaping the disorder of existence and putting one's mind back in order. In 1886, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche attests that "the thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets successfully through many a bad night."²⁴ The consolation of this thought can be expressed in at least two ways.

In the words of Martin Buber, suicide can appear as a "trapdoor" or escape hatch. When life is intolerable, the trapdoor can provide some peace of mind: "If things turn utterly hopeless and truly unbearable," I might say, "I don't have to bear them at all. The exit slide is right there. I can always jump."²⁵ One can marshal on through mass confusion, drudgery, and repression with the lifesaving thought that a dramatic alternative is always available: the uncanny peace of nonexistence.

The contemplation of suicide, however, may be comforting for another, more or less conventional reason. When life is out of control, when it is either too chaotic or too repressive, suicide beckons as the deeply comforting thought that one can, in the end, take the reins by taking one's life. Suicidal role-playing (as we will see, James liked to ingest all sorts of fatal chemicals), failed attempts, and sustained ideations may provide some reassurance that one still has the ability to act on his or her own behalf, to perform an act that is freely chosen precisely because it is radically

unthinkable. When James wrote to his father, he was contemplating this Pyrrhic model of suicide: he would win the chance to be free only in hazarding the greatest risk. To be clear, this change was not “necessary” in any fated or absolutely determined fashion. It was, instead, “necessary” only to the extent that James needed, rather desperately, to effect it on his own behalf. He needed to make a decision that mattered. It was necessary—only for him.

Whether suicide was a trapdoor or a Pyrrhic victory, for James it stood as a possible response to circumstances that were beyond his control and not of his choosing. Illness, anxiety, loneliness, and uncertainty culminated in an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness for life and its prospects. His reading of Huxley, in tandem with Darwin and Herbert Spencer, didn’t help. They only reinforced his sense that the “emancipated condition” that his mystical father had once achieved was simply beyond him, that human life could not transcend its fated condition.

As James struggled with the idea of determinism, he slowly realized that, in his words, “the stronghold of the deterministic sentiment is the antipathy to the idea of chance.” The belief that the universe afforded alternative possibilities—or meaningful chances—disrupted the determinist’s strict commitment to the principle of causation. And disruption is the one thing

that the determinist cannot abide. According to this view, James writes, “chance is something the notion of which no sane mind can for an instant tolerate in the world.”²⁶ What young James could not tolerate, however, was the pessimism and fatalism entailed by a world devoid of chances.

Determinism’s refusal to acknowledge possibility defaces the meaning of free will, James explained, but also vitiates all moral judgments. Remember that every event, for the determinist, even an obviously evil or heinous one, could not have been otherwise. Take the most gruesome murder or hate crime—did the perpetrator mean to do it? Did he or she have a genuine choice in matter? Could he or she have avoided becoming a criminal? Not according to the determinist. In this case, remorse, regret, and moral culpability make very little, if any, sense. There is no use wringing your hands over what might have been or ought to be. The word “ought” presupposes that one has a choice between different possible alternatives. And this is an assumption the determinist will never accept. When it comes to the universe, “it is what it is,” nothing more and nothing less. And an individual is powerless to change it. One literally doesn’t stand a chance. If this philosophical position makes you deeply uncomfortable, you’re not alone. James abhorred it, but in the early 1870s, he was transfixed,

paralyzed really, by the deterministic worldview. It was well fit to his study of the empirical sciences and causation in the natural world, but, more immediately, it explained his personal and mental state too perfectly not to be true.

James couldn't shake the sense of his total impotence, but he did manage, for the most part, to hide his depression from his friends and family. When James described the "sick soul" in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* decades later, he still tried to mask the fact that he himself was one of them, disguising it as the report of a mysterious "French correspondent." As James's son, Henry, later revealed, it was really the account of his father's own dire case. James writes that "while in this state of philosophical pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing room at twilight, to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without warning, just as if it came out of darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence."²⁷ At the same time, there arose before James a specter of an epileptic patient he had encountered in an asylum. Black-haired, greenish-skinned, knees drawn up to his chest, he sat on a bench "like a sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes."²⁸

Epilepsy is a chronic disorder. Its effects may temporarily fade, but it is always there. Waiting. Its causes

are mysterious, but its symptoms are not—repeated violent convulsions that wrack a body and control entirely the existence of a victim. An epileptic patient is the idea of determinism in human form. James gave one look at the hunched figure, and immediately concluded, “That shape am I.”²⁹ “Nothing that I possess,” he continued, “can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike me as it struck him.” This realization is never simply temporary, but rather reverberates through the life of the sick soul. James recounted, “I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread in the pit of my stomach . . . it gradually faded but for months I was unable to go into the dark alone.”³⁰

Nearly a century before French existentialism overtook Europe, William James was articulating existential anxiety in its most acute forms. The nausea that James experienced would not have been as debilitating had it not stood in such marked contrast to the oblivious optimism that James confronted in his Cambridge surroundings. “I remember wondering how other people,” he writes, “could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.”³¹

In *Nausea*, Jean-Paul Sartre, who read James extensively in the twentieth century, put a point on this remark: “I am alone in the midst of these happy,

reasonable voices. All these creatures spend their time explaining, realizing happily that they agree with each other. In Heaven's name, why is it so important to think the same things all together?"³² The normalcy of everyday life only heightens the sick soul's alienation, the felt belief that existence on the whole is botched. In James's words, to the sick soul or this "morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow."³³



We should be clear—James didn't write about the sick soul in order to give rise to it in his reader. His intention was never to effect existential anxiety or morbid depression. He knew that many healthy-minded people never experience the quietism and despair that he had faced. Good for them. They were the truly lucky ones, the "once-born" who came into the world as babes ready to embrace it.³⁴ James, however, wanted to acknowledge and describe a much wider range of individuals, with different philosophical outlooks and, often, with different psychological proclivities. In the midst of articulating different attitudes and moral temperaments, James asks to "[p]lease observe, however, that I am not yet pretending finally to

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