

QUOTATION

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM ON DETERMINISM

I am conscious that here and there I have taken free-will for granted; I have spoken as though I had power to mould my intentions and direct my actions as the whim took me. In other places I have spoken as though I accepted determinism. Such shilly-shallying would have been deplorable had I been writing a philosophical work. I make no such pretension. But how can I, an amateur, be expected to settle a question which the philosophers have not yet ceased to argue?

It might seem only sensible to leave the matter alone, but it happens to be one in which the writer of fiction is peculiarly concerned. For as a writer he finds himself compelled by his readers to rigid determination. I pointed out earlier in these pages how unwilling an audience is to accept impulse on the stage. Now an impulse is merely an urge to action of whose motive the agent is not conscious; it is analogous to an intuition, which is a judgment you make without being aware of its grounds. But though an impulse has its motive, an audience, because it is not obvious, will not accept it. The spectators of a play and the readers of a book insist on knowing the reasons of action and they will not admit its probability unless the reasons are cogent. Each person must behave in character; that means that he must do what from their knowledge of him they expect him to do. Cunning must be exercised in order to persuade them to accept the coincidences and accidents which in real life they swallow without a second thought. They are determinists to a man and the writer who trifles with their obstinate prejudice is lost. But when I look back upon my own life I cannot but notice how much that vitally affected me has been due to circumstances that it is hard not to regard as pure chance. Determinism tells us that choice follows the line of least resistance or the strongest motive. I am not conscious that I have always followed the line of least resistance, and if I have followed the strongest motive, that motive has been an idea of myself that I have gradually evolved. The metaphor of chess, though frayed and shop worn, is here wonderfully apposite. The pieces were provided and I had to accept the mode of action that was characteristic of each one; I had to accept the moves of the persons I played with; but it has seemed to me that I had the power to make on my side, in accordance perhaps with my likes and dislikes and the ideal that I set before me, moves that I freely willed. It has seemed to me that I have now and then been able to put forth an effort that was not wholly determined. If it was an illusion it was an illusion that had its own efficacy. The moves I made, I know now, were often mistaken, but in one way and another they have tended to the end in view. I wish that I had not committed a great many errors, but I do not deplore them nor would I now have them undone.

I do not think it unreasonable to hold the opinion that everything in the universe combines to cause every one of our actions, and this naturally includes all our opinions and desires; but whether an action, once performed, was inevitable from all eternity can only be decided when you have made up your mind whether or no there are events, the events that Dr. Broad calls causal progenitors, which are not completely determined. Hume long ago showed that there was no intrinsic connection between cause and effect which could be perceived by the mind; and of late the Principle of Indeterminacy, by bringing to view certain events to which apparently no causes can be assigned, has cast a doubt on the universal efficacy of those laws upon which science has hitherto been based. It looks as if chance must once more be reckoned with. But if we are not certainly bound by the law of cause and effect, then perhaps it is not an illusion that our wills are free. The bishops and the deans have snatched at this new notion as though it were the devil's tail by which they hoped to drag the old devil himself back into existence. There has been great rejoicing, if not in the courts of heaven, at all events in the palaces of the episcopacy. Perhaps the *Te Deum* has been sung too soon. It is well to remember that the two most eminent scientists of our day regard Heisenberg's principle with skepticism. Planck has stated his belief that further research will sweep away the anomaly, and Einstein has described the philosophical ideas that have been based upon it as "literature"; I am afraid that this is only his civil way of calling them nonsense. The physicists themselves tell us that physics is making such rapid progress that it is only possible to keep abreast of it by close study of the periodical literature. It is surely rash to found a theory on principles suggested by a science that is so unstable. Schrödinger himself has stated that a final and comprehensive judgment on the matter is at present impossible. The plain man is justified in sitting on the fence, but perhaps he is prudent to keep his legs dangling on the side of determinism.

From: Maugham, W. S. (1954). *Mr. Maugham himself*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

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