

Chapter 27

Individuality and Freedom



Ellen Bliss Talbot

Edited by Joel Katzav, and Dorothy Rogers

1 **Abstract** In this article, Ellen Bliss Talbot explores the free will/determinism debate
2 through an examination of the notions of individual unity, uniqueness, and self-
3 sufficiency.

4 In the present paper I wish to discuss the relation between the problem of freedom
5 and the conception of human individuality. It is often asserted that if we deny the
6 existence of real alternatives in the choices of men, we rob ‘personality’ of all its
7 significance, that unless the will is ‘free,’ in the sense of there being real alternatives,
8 we have no true individuality. It is the correctness of this assertion that I wish to
9 consider.

10 Our first task is to try to make clear to ourselves what we mean by individuality.
11 An exhaustive study of the concept would lead us beyond the limits of this paper,
12 but we can, I think, give an account that will be sufficient for the purposes of our
13 discussion.¹ The ordinary conception of an ‘individual’ seems to include three chief

¹ The purpose of this paper limits us to the ordinary notion of individuality. Such an analysis as Professor Royce, *e.g.*, attempts in his Supplementary Essay to *The Conception of God* (p. 135ff.) is not called for. I wish simply to show that human individuality, in the sense in which we ordinarily take it, is not in any way endangered by the denial of real alternatives in men’s choices. This limitation of the problem seems justifiable because the protests against such denial are commonly made from the point of view of the ordinary conception.

Ellen Bliss Talbot: Originally published in 1909 in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 18, No. 6, pp. 600–614

E. B. Talbot · J. Katzav (✉)

School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD,
Australia

e-mail: j.katzav@uq.edu.au

E. B. Talbot · D. Rogers

Department of Educational Foundations, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA

e-mail: rogersd@montclair.edu

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023
J. Katzav et al. (eds.), *Knowledge, Mind and Reality: An Introduction by Early
Twentieth-Century American Women Philosophers*, Women in the History of Philosophy
and Sciences 18, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24437-7_27

301

14 factors,—unity, uniqueness, and completeness or self-sufficiency. We shall consider
 15 each of these briefly.

16 That individuality always involves some sort of unity will hardly be denied. That
 17 which is in no sense one is in no sense an individual; and the more truly a thing can be
 18 called one, the more truly can it be called an individual. We must distinguish, however,
 19 between two aspects of unity,—the quantitative aspect or numerical unity, and the
 20 qualitative aspect or inner coherence. Both quantitative and qualitative unity are
 21 essential to any high degree of individuality, but the qualitative is the more important
 22 of the two. The lowest phase of unity is exemplified in the mere aggregate,—for
 23 instance, in a heap of stones. Here there is numerical unity of a sort, but inner
 24 coherence is almost or wholly lacking. The heap of stones is, in a sense, one, and as
 25 one it may also be called an individual thing. But unless it is more than an aggregate,
 26 unless as a heap it fulfills a certain purpose,—e.g., the marking of a goal,—its unity,
 27 and hence its individuality, is of the lowest grade. A single stone is more truly
 28 one; its numerical unity is more obvious, and it has a certain small degree of inner
 29 coherence,—the mechanical coherence of its particles. A plant, in turn, has more
 30 unity, more inner coherence, than a stone; a highly organized plant, more than one
 31 of the lower forms of the vegetable kingdom. And with the progress in unity, there
 32 is a corresponding progress in individuality: the single stone has more individuality
 33 than the heap of stones; the plant, more than the stone; the highly organized plant,
 34 more than the less highly organized one.

35 It is obvious that qualitative unity involves multiplicity and complexity. From the
 36 quantitative point of view, the fresh-water hydra is just as truly one as the human body
 37 is; but from the qualitative point of view the latter has a much greater degree of unity.
 38 If a fresh-water hydra be cut into halves, each portion, under ordinary conditions,
 39 will regenerate its missing parts and will then perform all the necessary functions of
 40 life; but if the human body be cut into halves, both portions will die. We have the
 41 highest unity in a whole composed of many different, but firmly coherent, parts.

42 Qualitative unity, as involving multiplicity and complexity, leads us naturally
 43 to uniqueness, the second element in individuality. That is unique which is unlike
 44 all other things, which is, in greater or less degree, different from everything else.
 45 Uniqueness, like unity, has two aspects, a quantitative and a qualitative. In the lowest
 46 sense of the term, anything is unique, just as, in the lowest sense, anything may be
 47 called a unity. Uniqueness of the lowest kind is conferred by temporal and spatial
 48 position. Whatever occupies a given space at a given time is, in this respect at least,
 49 unique, different from everything else. Position in time and space serves to distinguish
 50 one grain of sand from a second grain, which, in all other respects, is exactly like
 51 it. And in the degree in which each of these grains of sand is unique, it is also
 52 individual; as Schopenhauer has said, space and time are principles of individuation.
 53 But, obviously, we have here a low form of individuality; uniqueness which is merely
 54 quantitative cannot bestow upon its possessor individuality of a high order. For this,
 55 qualitative uniqueness is essential.² And, within limits, the degree of individuality

² It is true, of course, that 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' are not wholly unrelated terms. As Hegel has shown, differences in degree often pass over, by almost imperceptible stages, into qualitative

56 increases with the qualitative uniqueness; the more complex the organism is,—the
 57 more qualitative differences there are which distinguish it from all other organisms,—
 58 the more individual it is. The human being represents a higher type of individuality
 59 than the most highly organized plant or brute, because the play of his mental life gives
 60 to him a greater degree of qualitative difference from the other members of his kind
 61 than is possessed by any brute or plant. Similarly, men themselves differ greatly in
 62 the degree of their individuality; and, speaking generally, a man is more individual,
 63 the more clearly his inner life and his mental characteristics are differentiated from
 64 those of his fellows. But, as has already been hinted, this is true only within certain
 65 limits. The uniqueness which constitutes the truest individuality rests upon a broad
 66 basis of likeness. All normal human beings share in a certain common nature; and
 67 the most individual man is not he who violates this common nature. There is a point
 68 beyond which unlikeness ceases to be valued by us; individuality has passed over
 69 into *bizarrierie*. It is not that, beyond a certain limit, individuality does not appeal
 70 to us as desirable; it is rather that we feel that that which is bizarre is less truly individual
 71 than that in which the uniqueness recognizes certain bounds. We do not regard the
 72 crank as having more originality than the genius, but as having less. The genius is
 73 always, indeed, a highly differentiated being; but at the same time, unless a man can
 74 make us feel that he speaks the common language of humanity, that he sounds the
 75 deep note of universal passion, that he gives expression,—in his own way,—to the
 76 experience of us all, we refuse him the name of genius; we refuse to recognize in
 77 him individuality of the highest order.

78 Apparently, then, the uniqueness which is a factor in individuality must rest upon
 79 a basis of similarity. This is true, at least, in the case of an individual which is, at the
 80 same time, part of a larger whole. Reality taken in its entirety is unique in a somewhat
 81 different sense; and if we say that the whole of reality is an individual, it is obvious
 82 that we must modify our conception of individuality. Into this question, however, we
 83 need not enter; for our concern is to determine the nature of *human* individuality,
 84 and the human being, certainly, is an individual which is part of a larger whole.³

85 We pass on to the third factor in individuality. We have spoken of it as completeness
 86 or self-sufficiency; but in its higher degrees it may also be called self-direction. That
 87 some measure of independence is essential to our notion of individuality will hardly
 88 be questioned. The hand is less truly an individual than the body, because it is in much
 89 smaller degree sufficient unto itself. And, in general, the more power any organism
 90 has of directing its own life, the more truly individual it is. Hence, we regard the
 91 animal as having more individuality than the plant of equally complex structure. And
 92 in the animal kingdom itself, the higher we rise in the scale, the greater becomes the
 93 self-sufficiency or power of self-direction, and the greater the individuality. With the
 94 development of the rational faculty in man, this power is enormously increased; and

differences. But the general distinction between qualitative and quantitative uniqueness is clear, and of this distinction my statement holds.

³ That the human being is, in some sense, part of a whole every one except the mythological solipsist will, I suppose, admit. The most thorough-going pluralist will hardly carry his doctrine of the independence of the individual to the point of denying this.

95 for this reason, among others, we have in man a higher type of individuality than
 96 we find in any brute. Similarly, within the human race the degree of individuality
 97 varies with the power of self-direction. A man who has no opinions of his own, who
 98 borrows from others his theory of life and his code of morals, whose choices seem
 99 to be decided by the play of circumstances, is said to lack individuality.

100 In our consideration of uniqueness, we saw that, beyond certain limits, it does not
 101 conduce to what we ordinarily mean by individuality. The case of self-sufficiency is
 102 somewhat different. It is clear that the human being, since he is part of a whole, can
 103 never attain to complete self-sufficiency. But whereas, we think that a man is more
 104 truly individual who does not depart too far from the rest of his kind, we do not feel
 105 that power of self-direction can exist in such degree as to destroy the individuality.
 106 We recognize the fact that no human being has complete power of self-direction, but
 107 we regard this as a limitation of his individuality. Here, at any rate, the individuality
 108 of the part seems to point to a higher individuality, which could be possessed, if at
 109 all, only by the whole of reality.⁴

110 What we must say, then, seems to be this. The individuality of the part implies
 111 unity, uniqueness, and some degree of self-sufficiency. In its higher forms, the unity
 112 involves great inner complexity, while the uniqueness rests upon a broad basis of
 113 similarity. Finally, while, in general, individuality increases with the degree of self-
 114 sufficiency, yet, by its very nature, the part cannot be completely self-sufficient. Other
 115 things being equal, that part will be most truly individual which has the highest degree
 116 of independence that is compatible with its fulfilling its function in the whole. More
 117 than this, it seems, we cannot say; but this is all that we need for our present purposes.

118 What, now, is the bearing of this conception of individuality upon the problem of
 119 freedom? The question actually at issue to-day, the *live* question in the discussion,
 120 is that of ‘real alternatives.’ Confronted with the necessity of deciding between two
 121 opposed courses of action, *a* and *b*, I choose, let us say, *a*. The question in dispute, as
 122 I understand it, is: Was it really possible for me to choose *b* instead of *a*, possible, i.e.,
 123 in the sense that I could have chosen *b* without anything, either in myself or in the
 124 attendant circumstances, being different from what it was? To answer this question
 125 in the affirmative is to accept, and to answer it in the negative is to reject, the doctrine
 126 of real alternatives.⁵

127 It is unfortunate that we have no words to indicate the respective opponents and
 128 champions of this doctrine. I should be inclined to use the words ‘determinism’ and
 129 ‘indeterminism’ to mark the distinction but for the fact that some who reject the
 130 theory of real alternatives are unwilling to be labeled as ‘determinists.’ And it must
 131 be admitted that ‘determinism’ has a certain connotation that is not involved in the

⁴ I say ‘if at all’ because, while it seems clear that the whole of reality has self-sufficiency and a certain kind of uniqueness, its possession of any high degree of unity is often questioned.

⁵ Though some who call themselves ‘indeterminists’ might dissent, I think that we are justified in saying that this is the vital point in the present-day discussion of ‘freedom’. And at least three prominent champions of ‘freedom’ seem so to regard it. Cf. James, “The Will to Believe and other Essays” (1897), p. 150ff.; Schiller, “Studies in Humanism” (1907), p. 392ff.; Perry, “Freedom as Practical Postulate,” *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. XIII, pp. 42, 46, 51.

132 mere denial of real alternatives. It seems better, therefore, to discuss the question
 133 without employing these labels.⁶

134 A word of explanation is necessary before we enter upon the discussion. I am not
 135 primarily concerned with attacking the doctrine of real alternatives. My purpose is
 136 defensive,—namely, to show that there is nothing in the denial of real alternatives
 137 which should, in itself, prevent our conceiving of the human being as having the
 138 three requisites of individuality which were brought out in our analysis.

139 Let us begin with unity. That the human self is a complete unity no one would be
 140 so bold as to assert. The lack of consistency in our opinions, the variability of our
 141 feelings and our purposes, the sense of inner discord, all this shows indubitably that
 142 we fall far short of that complete inner coherence which forms part of our ideal of
 143 individuality. But the fact remains that, other things being equal, the more harmonious
 144 and coherent a personality is, the more individuality we ascribe to it. Granting, then,
 145 that the human being only partially fulfills this requirement, our question is, what
 146 unity has to do with the doctrine of real alternatives in human choice. So far as I can
 147 see, it touches the doctrine at only one point. The denial of real alternatives implies
 148 the insistence upon the continuity of the moral life. When we say that the man who
 149 has made a certain choice could not have decided otherwise unless he had been, in
 150 some respect, a different sort of man, we assert the vital connection between what
 151 one is and what one does. It is because we regard the man's act, not as something
 152 externally connected with him, but as, in deepest truth, his very self that we say,
 153 *He* could not have chosen otherwise. The denial of real alternatives, then, instead of
 154 being in any way hostile to our conception of the self as unitary, is fully in harmony
 155 with it,⁷ and seems, indeed, in closer harmony than the assertion of the doctrine is.

156 I think we may say, then, that so far as the element of unity is concerned, individ-
 157 uality does not suffer from the denial of real alternatives. Indeed, all the objections
 158 which men most commonly feel to this denial seem to be connected with the other
 159 two factors. We shall, therefore, devote the rest of our discussion to them. It will be
 160 convenient to begin with the last one, with self-sufficiency. We have already said

⁶ 'Freedom,' of course, is still more misleading. Professor James, with his humorous reference to "the word-grabbing game" (op. cit., pp. 149, 179), has called attention to the fact that determinists and indeterminists alike have an ardent affection for the term and are equally anxious to be known as believers in 'freedom.' The reason for this is not far to seek. The word has so many associations with what we hold highest and dearest,—with political liberty, with intellectual and social opportunity,—that the desire is by no means unnatural.

⁷ To this, the believer in real alternatives might raise the objection that it asserts a greater unity in human nature than actually exists. A character that is completely self-consistent and coherent, he might urge, could act, under given circumstances, in only one way. But for any being that lacks this perfect coherence there may be, in many cases, real alternatives. (Cf. Schiller, op. cit., p. 399ff.) My reply to this would run somewhat as follows. There is, of course, a sense in which one might say that two quite different acts are possible for the ordinary man. His personality is not perfectly harmonious; there are in him opposed tendencies, conflicting desires. Hence, you may say that, taking the man as a whole,—a whole of many selves,—each of the opposed courses of action appeals to, something in him and is possible for him. But in the moment of decision, the self which chooses is fairly coherent. It is not many selves; for so, there could be no choice. One of the many selves chooses. And if there is any bond of union between the self and its acts, this choosing self could not find its expression in *either one* of two directly opposed courses, but only in one.

161 that this characteristic cannot belong to the human being in the highest measure.
 162 We are “members one of another,” and we must pay the costs, as well as reap the
 163 advantages, of this fact. The tremendous force of heredity, the subtle influences of
 164 other personalities upon ours, these we can no more escape than we can avoid taking
 165 air into our lungs. But when all the considerations of this sort have been urged, it
 166 remains true that we have a certain measure of self-dependence. And we must now
 167 inquire whether the denial of real alternatives is consistent with the affirmation that
 168 the human being has a moderate degree of independence.

169 The believer in real alternatives will make haste to tell us that it is not. The theory
 170 which we are defending, he declares, leaves no room for the independence of the
 171 individual. If you say that the choice which I have just made could not have been
 172 other than it is unless something, either in myself or in the circumstances, had been
 173 different, you are virtually admitting that this choice of mine was determined long
 174 ago,—at my birth, nay, ages before my birth. And if this be true, it is mere mockery to
 175 suggest that I have any power of self-direction. Let us at least be honest with ourselves
 176 and face the bitter fact that we are mere puppets, controlled by some external force,
 177 that all our deep-rooted conviction of our responsibility, all our quivering sense of
 178 the importance of our choices, is illusory. There is no middle ground between the
 179 two positions: either real alternatives or complete lack of the power of self-direction.

180 I am far from wishing to deny that these considerations have weight. There are
 181 few of us, I think, however strongly we may be convinced of the untenability of
 182 the doctrine of real alternatives, who do not, in certain moments, feel the force of an
 183 appeal like this. None the less, it seems to me to involve more than one misconception.
 184 In the first place, as I look at the matter, it is the *assertion* of real alternatives that
 185 is actually fatal to the belief in man’s power of self-direction. If, for the self of a
 186 given moment, two opposed courses of action are equally possible, how can we say
 187 that either one of them is really representative of that self, is *its* choice? My self,
 188 in the moment of choice, is not anything and everything, but something particular.
 189 And how we can say that from this particular self either one of two utterly different
 190 actions can issue, I cannot see. If both actions are equally possible, this can only
 191 be because the choice does *not* proceed from the self. If I really have the power of
 192 self-direction, my act must be one with me; and two utterly unlike acts could not be
 193 equally one with the me of a given moment.

194 I suspect, however, that it is of little use to dwell upon this point. To those of us
 195 who accept it, it seems hardly conceivable that any one can believe the opposite,
 196 and our opponents have, doubtless, as great difficulty in understanding how we can
 197 accept it. We may pass on, therefore, to another consideration. We have said that in
 198 certain moments the appeal for real alternatives strikes a sympathetic chord in the
 199 hearts of most of us. And it may be useful to inquire how this feeling of sympathy is
 200 to be accounted for. If we reject the doctrine of real alternatives and yet are conscious
 201 of sometimes having the feeling,—as I, for one, am,—it is incumbent upon us to try
 202 to analyze it. Before we are through with this analysis, it will have carried us over
 203 from the conception of self-direction to that of uniqueness.

204 What, then, is the reason for our shrinking from the thought that in the case of a
 205 choice which we have made, we could not, being just what we were, have decided

206 differently? It seems to me that there are four chief reasons. The first of these is a
 207 real misunderstanding, a misunderstanding which is continually reappearing after it
 208 has been corrected. Very frequently, when we are told, 'You could not have chosen
 209 otherwise,' there is, implicit in our thought, the idea that we might have desired to
 210 choose differently and have been unable. The thought which the words suggest to
 211 us is of something that can thwart our will. We know, perhaps, that this is not what
 212 is meant; we are told, at any rate, that,—physical compulsion excepted,—there is
 213 nothing save ourselves that can prevent our acting in a certain way. But in spite of this,
 214 we smuggle in, almost unconsciously, the idea which alters the whole situation. The
 215 consequence is that we think of ourselves *as not being able to choose that which we*
 216 *really desire*. In the dim background of our consciousness, there lurks the thought of
 217 a thwarted self, a self compelled by some mysterious power,—the force of hereditary
 218 tendency, the influence of environment, the fatal power of its past choices,—to do
 219 that which it *would* not do.

220 Closely connected with this is another consideration that will help to explain
 221 further the feeling of which we are speaking. It is sometimes said that whereas, in the
 222 case of human choice, we shrink from the thought that there are no real alternatives,
 223 most of us are quite ready to believe this in regard to the divine mind; we do not
 224 hesitate to say that God, being what he is, can act only in the way in which he does
 225 act. This has suggested to me the thought that our so-called 'yearning for freedom'
 226 is, in part, a yearning for complete self-sufficiency. It does not distress us to think
 227 that an 'infinite' being could not act in another way than that in which he does act,
 228 because we see clearly, in this case, that the 'could not' has no reference to any
 229 power other than his own. If, then, we were but infinite we should not shrink from
 230 the thought that our choices could not be other than they are. It is because we realize
 231 our limitations, because we recognize the fact that we are only a part of reality, that
 232 we shrink. For to say of us that we can act only in a certain way seems to put the
 233 ultimate source of the 'can' in something not ourselves. Our 'yearning for freedom,'
 234 then, is an expression of our sense of our own limitation, is the longing of the spirit for
 235 greater independence and self-sufficiency than it is conscious of possessing. But this,
 236 I think, cannot be held to constitute a valid objection to the denial of real alternatives.
 237 All that it amounts to is that we should like to be more nearly self-sufficient than we
 238 actually are.

239 The third reason why many persons are unwilling to think that there are no real
 240 alternatives expresses itself in a protest against the doctrine with which we are all
 241 familiar. If there are no real alternatives, it is urged, the choice that I am to make
 242 to-morrow is *already* determined, was determined ages ago. But if this be true, it robs
 243 human action of its significance, takes from life all its vivid sense of real happenings,
 244 of momentous things to be decided, of great issues depending upon us. We still live on
 245 and go through our daily round of work and play. But the deep sense of the meaning
 246 of life, the consciousness that *we* are contributing to reality, that we are helping to
 247 determine the fate of ourselves and others,—all this is gone, and with it all zest and
 248 passion die out. So, human life, which might have been great and glorious if only the
 249 philosophers had left us our vivid sense of 'freedom,' becomes 'aimless, helpless,
 250 hopeless.'

251 It will be convenient to postpone the answer to this objection until we have consid-
 252 ered the last of our four reasons. This has quite as much to do with uniqueness as with
 253 self-sufficiency, and will thus lead us on to the remaining element in our conception
 254 of individuality. This last reason has its source in the belief that unless there are real
 255 alternatives in human choice, any one who knew a certain man through and through
 256 could tell in advance precisely how he would act under given circumstances; that,
 257 to quote the words of John Stuart Mill, “given the motives which are present to an
 258 individual’s mind, and given likewise the character and disposition of the individual,
 259 the manner in which he will act may be unerringly inferred; that if we knew the
 260 person thoroughly, and knew all the inducements which are acting upon him, we
 261 could foretell his conduct with as much certainty as we can predict any physical
 262 event.”⁸

263 Mill himself, it will be remembered, maintains that there is no good reason why
 264 any one should object to this supposed consequence of the denial of real alternatives.
 265 Unfortunately, however, the ordinary man does object to it seriously. While, in many
 266 cases, it does not distress him to learn that a certain choice which he has made was
 267 predicted, he cannot bear the thought that some one, knowing him completely at
 268 his birth and foreseeing all the external circumstances of his life, could confidently
 269 foretell how he would act under every one of these circumstances. The reason for his
 270 objection is, I think, twofold. In the first place, if all my choices can be thus resolved
 271 into the tendencies which I inherited from my forebears and the external influences
 272 to which I have been subjected, what is there, in this whole life of mine, that I have
 273 done? What has become of that power of self-direction which is one of the essential
 274 factors in individuality? And what has become, in the second place, of that other
 275 factor which we call uniqueness? For the supposition that any one could thus predict
 276 all the details of my thought and feeling and conduct seems to involve the assumption
 277 that in my essential nature I am like every one else. He who could thus foretell my
 278 life would have changed me into an abstract formula, which he could deal with as
 279 he could with a formula of mathematics. And against such transformation of our
 280 palpitating life, with its vivid sense of its uniqueness, its individual worth, our spirit
 281 rises in passionate protest.⁹

282 And well it may. If this is what the denial of real alternatives means, it is no wonder
 283 that men hesitate to make it. I hope to show, however, that this is not the inevitable
 284 consequence of such a denial.¹⁰ The first thing to be said, it seems to me is this: if
 285 the denial of real alternatives has for its consequence the theoretical possibility of
 286 infallible prediction,¹¹ it is certainly hostile to the conceptions of uniqueness and
 287 self-direction; but that it has this logical consequence is, so far as I can see, pure

⁸ “Logic,” Bk. VI, Chap. II, § 2.

⁹ No one has better voiced this feeling than Mr. Bradley, in his essay on “The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility” (*Ethical Studies*, Essay I). See particularly pp. 16, 18 f.

¹⁰ Many determinists, indeed, have assumed that it is. And this is one reason why I have not used the word ‘determinism,’ in the present paper, to designate the position which I am defending.

¹¹ I say ‘theoretical’ because we all admit that our *actual* predictions of conduct are, at best, only highly probable.

288 assumption. If there were no real alternatives and *if a man were not in a very true*
 289 *sense unique*, it would follow logically that one who had knowledge of a certain kind
 290 could foretell all his actions. But without this second hypothesis it does not logically
 291 follow. For if the man is unique, we have not, and cannot conceivably have, sufficient
 292 *data* for predicting how he will act in all cases.

293 My own conviction is, on the one hand, that the doctrine of real alternatives is fatal
 294 to the conception of ‘choice,’ and on the other hand, that every element of reality is,
 295 in some sense or other, unique.¹² This uniqueness is found in unusual degree in the
 296 human being. Every human life, and every choice in that life, is something unique.
 297 Now if this be true, it follows that such prediction as we were objecting to above
 298 is, not only practically, but also theoretically, impossible. For that which is unique
 299 cannot by any possibility be infallibly predicted.¹³ Even if you knew everything about
 300 me; if my whole past and all the past of my ancestors for countless generations were
 301 open to your gaze; if,—to suppose the impossible,—you had penetrated the inmost
 302 recesses of my thought and feeling,—even so, you could not infallibly predict how
 303 I would act at a certain future moment of great temptation. For we can predict only
 304 on the basis of likeness to the past, and we can predict infallibly only where the
 305 likeness is complete. Now this requirement of complete resemblance is never met
 306 in the case of any real choice on the part of a moral agent. In any real choice we
 307 have a complex set of conditions which has never, in all the history of the past, been
 308 precisely duplicated; infallible prediction is, therefore, a sheer impossibility. It is true
 309 that those who know us well are often able to foretell our conduct and our mental
 310 attitudes with a large measure of assurance. They can tell, i.e., how we are likely to
 311 feel and act under circumstances which are very similar to others in which they have
 312 known us to be placed in the past. But there are two factors which tend to make the
 313 prediction more or less uncertain. The circumstances are never precisely the same
 314 again, and we ourselves are never precisely the same. Thus the prediction can never
 315 rightfully claim to be more than highly probable.

316 But can we, then, predict anything infallibly,—any event in the outside world
 317 even? Here, too, in the physical world,—if my theory of the nature of reality be
 318 correct,—everything that happens is in some measure unique. Strictly speaking,
 319 therefore, no event, in its concrete fulness, can be infallibly predicted. This concrete
 320 fulness natural science tries to express in abstract formulae; and in so far as the event
 321 can be reduced to a set of such formulae, in so far it can be foretold. But what science
 322 foretells is always, after all, only a certain aspect of the total event. The abstract
 323 formulae are correct, perhaps, from their limited point of view. But they are never
 324 adequate to the fulness of reality.

325 The matter may be put briefly in this fashion: In so far as an event is not unique, in
 326 so far,—granting certain conditions of knowledge on our part,—it can be predicted.

¹² ‘Every element of reality,’ I have said. But of course all that is needed for the purposes of the argument is what immediately follows, that every human being and every real choice is unique.

¹³ Humanly speaking, i.e. What a divine intelligence could or could not do, I hardly feel qualified to suggest. It seems safe to say, however, that no mind could exactly foretell my future save one,—if such a one be possible,—to whose gaze the future is open just as the present is to ours. And of such an intelligence it would hardly be accurate to say that it *foretells*.

327 Now, in the case of physical happenings, it may be possible so to limit ourselves to a
 328 particular aspect of reality that we can foretell with complete assurance. That is, we
 329 can say, Given ordinary air of a certain temperature and humidity, a definite fall in
 330 its temperature, without change in any other of its conditions, will be followed by a
 331 precipitation of moisture. We can predict here, because we have arbitrarily so limited
 332 our view of reality that what we are dealing with is precisely similar to something
 333 which we have experienced before. But try to do this with a human being, and what
 334 is the result? In order so to limit your view of him that infallible prediction would
 335 be, even theoretically, possible, you would have to disregard everything in him that
 336 is unique; and that in him which is unique —is the very essence of him.

337 It seems to me that we have removed the supposed difficulty with regard to the
 338 possibility of prediction. We may now turn back to our other objection, namely, that
 339 if there are no real alternatives in human choice, all our sense of real happenings,
 340 of actual contributions which we make to reality, of the vital importance of our
 341 decisions, becomes illusory. Here, again, my purpose is simply to show that this
 342 is not a necessary consequence of the denial of real alternatives, taken in itself. A
 343 theory which maintains that time and change have no part in the fundamental nature
 344 of reality is, to say the least, difficult to reconcile with a belief in the vital significance
 345 of human choice; for ‘choice’ seems to have no meaning left if time and happenings
 346 are not real. If, however, one maintains that time and change are of the very essence
 347 of the real, the case is different.

348 It is no part of my purpose to prove that reality is essentially temporal. Neither do
 349 I care to inquire here whether it is possible to unite the two aspects of timelessness
 350 and temporality in such a way as fully to preserve the rights of the latter. I wish
 351 simply to consider what are the consequences for human individuality if we assert
 352 the fundamental reality of time and yet deny that there are alternatives in human
 353 choice.

354 If we say that time is real and if we add to this the assertion, which we have
 355 already made, that every element of reality is unique, there is no good reason why
 356 the denial of real alternatives should destroy our sense of the vividness of life.¹⁴ For
 357 what have we, on these conditions? We have a universe which is constantly changing,
 358 continually bringing forth the new. In particular, each human life, and each human
 359 choice, is something that has never been before and will never be again. This world
 360 is not something fixed and once for all there; it is a world in which new things are
 361 continually coming to be. And every human choice, since it is itself unique and helps
 362 to create a unique set of conditions, plays its part in the making of reality. How then
 363 should we say that life lacks zest or significance?

364 But what one is to do to-morrow, you tell me, is already determined. I can reply
 365 only by pointing out that this is the old error which has been exposed again and again,
 366 the error of assuming that my *past* self can determine my action, but that my *present*
 367 self cannot. What I am to do to-morrow is determined only in the moment when I
 368 choose it, and is determined only by me who choose. What I who choose am, is,

¹⁴ Those philosophers who say that it *must*, might well be asked to try to discover whether, in point of fact, it *does*.

369 indeed, not something utterly disconnected with what I have been,—and if we saw
370 clearly, we could not wish that it should be. But it still remains true that I,—the ‘I’
371 of the moment of choosing,—decide. Our objection, it seems to me, is a case of the
372 confusion of which we have already spoken, the thought of a present self, desiring
373 to act in a certain way and prevented from realizing its purposes by the clutch upon
374 it of the dead hand of the past. And here we must leave the matter. Real happenings
375 in which we ourselves play a part, momentous decisions which we ourselves have to
376 make, the power of determining, in no inconsiderable measure, our own future and
377 the future of others,—all these we assert. And yet we must remember that we are not
378 gods, but men. We are not entirely self-sufficient, not strictly independent centers of
379 power and action; we are part of a great whole. The same life-blood is in us which
380 flows in the veins of these other men, our brothers. By all the subtleties of heredity
381 and of personal influence, our lives and our destinies are interwoven with those of
382 countless other human beings. Such complete independence as we sometimes long
383 for is seen, when we consider it aright, to be quite impossible. And yet, in spite of
384 all, there is given to each of us some degree of unity, of self-direction, of uniqueness,
385 some measure of that priceless possession which men call individuality.