

## Koestler and James

Does it really matter which view of human nature you believe? Sure, they carry different implications. Some hold we're free, others that we're not; some say that we have a divine destiny, others that we don't. But in the last analysis, such claims raise unanswerable philosophical questions. So what difference does it make which view you hold?

Author and outspoken opponent of behaviorism Arthur Koestler (1905–1983) thinks it does make a difference. In his autobiography, *Arrow in the Blue*, Koestler recalls how his own belief in free will significantly affected his decision to abandon his studies in engineering for the uncertain career of an author:

*I had no plans except "to lead my own life." In order to do that I had to "get off the track." This metaphorical track I visualized very precisely as an endless stretch of steel rails on rotting sleepers. You were born onto a certain track, as a train is put on its run according to the timetable; and once on the track, you no longer had free will. Your life was determined ... by outside forces; the rail of steel, stations, shunting points. If you accepted that condition, running on rails became a habit which you could no longer break. The point was to jump off the track before the habit was formed, before you became encased in a rattling prison. To change the metaphor: reason and routine kept people in a strait-jacket which made their living flesh rot beneath it.*

For Koestler, then, the belief in his own personal freedom led him to the conviction that he could "jump off the track" chosen for him by others, that he could lead his own life.

Koestler's account is reminiscent of the crisis that the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910) once faced. James had suffered throughout his life from a variety of emotional disorders that left him feeling profoundly alienated. Then, like Koestler, James seemingly took a giant step toward resolving his problems when he was able to satisfy himself that he was free. James captures the moment in a letter to his father:

*I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second "Essais" and see no reason why his definition of Free Will—"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts"—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.*

### QUESTIONS

1. Illustrate how the belief in one or more of the views of human nature is concretely expressed in your life.
2. Have you ever felt or found yourself "blocked" because of how you saw yourself or what you believed you were or were capable of being?

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Source: Arthur Koestler, *Arrow in the Blue* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 32. Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 148.