

Was William James the First Thinker to Solve the Ancient Problem Of Free Will?

The problem of free will is one of the most ancient and classical problems of philosophy, dating to the work of Democritus and Leucippus 2400 years ago.

In this seminar, we examine the evidence that 125 years ago William James was the first thinker to propose today's most plausible and practical two-stage solution, – first chance, then choice, - first thoughts, then action, - first possibilities, then actuality, – first “free,” then “will.”

To better understand the two-stage solution, you should be familiar with the standard two-part argument *against* free will.

“Soft determinists” since David Hume have reconciled freedom with determinism, the first part of the standard argument.

William James achieved the second and more difficult part, reconciling free will with indeterminism and absolute chance.

Research into James’ contemporaries and predecessors shows that no one had his complete two-stage solution.

Since James’ model of “mental evolution” was itself based on the two steps of Darwinian evolution, it is unlikely that anyone before Darwin had the idea, but we will look at the ancients Epicurus and Lucretius.

Important contemporaries include Peirce, Renouvier, Fouillée, and Miller (a/k/a/ R. E. Hobart).

Since James, a dozen thinkers have discussed two-stage models, including Poincaré, Compton, Popper, Margenau, Dennett, Kane, Mele, Kosslyn, Doyle, and Heisenberg.

James liked to say that ideas “*present themselves*” to us as alternative possibilities. I like to say that

Our thoughts *come to us* freely.
Our actions *go from us* willfully.

Join us in our efforts to establish priority for William James in this “*morally and historically momentous*” argument for human freedom.

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William James Symposium



A seminar at the
William James Symposium,
Chocorua, New Hampshire,
12:30-2pm, August 15, 2010
wjsociety.org/symposium.htm

What's wrong with this argument?

Stated simply, the standard two-part argument against free will is this.

Either determinism or indeterminism is true.

If our actions are determined (really *pre-determined*), we are not free.

If our actions are random, our will is not responsible for them.



William James Hall, Harvard University

Most thinkers in William James Hall today are determinists or compatibilists. James called them “hard and soft determinists” in his 1884 talk to Harvard Divinity students in the Lowell Lecture Hall, one block down Kirkland Street.

Presentation slides are online at
informationphilosopher.com/presentations/WJS-2010.ppt