

# A comparison between John Hospers and William James in regard to free will and det...

[Philosophy](#)



## **Progressing Through our Ability to Think**

Today, in an age of mass communication, social media and portable technological devices, are we the sole creators of our own thoughts and actions, or are we produced by society and others? According to John Hospers, there are always factors that cause us to act in a certain way, whether they be internal or external, even though we still believe this to be a result of our own will. William James on the other hand, a strong anti-determinist, suggests that human beings are not determined by preceding causes that eliminate their possible actions, but that rather they can in some situations make free choices. In this paper, I will compare how Hospers and James' arguments are relevant with the notion between determinism and free will and the ability for humans to think independently.

The argument over Free Will is very complex and diversified. There are many sides to the argument but everything gets down to only three major movements. The first side of the argument comes with Hospers and his idea that actions and choices are primarily stemming from the early parental environment and have no to little connection with what an individual chooses to do. The opposite side of the argument comes by James, where he argues that knowledge and free will are an agency of humans and they have the ability to control the consequences and their choices. The third and most responsive argument, or the so-called middle ground is that we are determined and yet free will is still possible. According to Compatibilism by Craig Ross, by saying that we are both free but also determined, we leave lots of space for improvement. He pledges that we have to choose between

these two opposite opinions. Based on his observation, there is either freedom or determinism.

Looking over Hospers and his observations over hundreds of psychiatric case documentations, he claims that the subconscious environment which comes from past and predetermined experience, forces mold actions and shapes one's character forever. One of his most influential works not his topic is his *What Means This Freedom*, where Hospers clearly offers examples that prove his points over determinism. An example that he uses states that,

“. . . The mother blames her daughter for choosing the wrong men as candidates for husbands; but though the daughter thinks she is choosing freely and spends a considerable amount of time 'deciding' among them, the identification with her sick father, resulting from Oedipal fantasies in early childhood, prevents her from caring for any but sick men, twenty or thirty years older than herself. Blaming her is beside the point; she cannot help it, and she cannot change it" (Hospers). This example proves that choices are in every possible way determined by past experiences, and the environment which a person came to grow up in. For example if the factor of the sick father didn't come to play a role, then the decision for the daughter could have been different, and her following actions could have taken a completely different approach. Hospers also argues that "Countless criminal acts are thought out in great detail; yet the participants are (without their own knowledge) acting out fantasies, fears, and defenses from early childhood, over who's coming and going they have no conscious control" (Hospers). Then the argument over society and its role come to play a major

part in this discussion, but the main point that determinists are trying to prove is that every action, either willingly or unwillingly is predetermined and based on our past. It is the so-called “ behind the scenes” action.

When the notion of determinism came in the forefront of ideologies of existence, there was a backlash called Libertarianism. The most understood definition of Libertarianism would be the use of liberty as the core principle of life. What would follow as a second branch of this broad ideology would be the Indeterminism, and as the title states is an ideology against the notion of determinism. One of the greatest proponents of indeterminism was William James, an American 20th century philosopher. His simplified ideology states that the will for humans to choose is an active part of their lives, it is not a life full of wild happenstance. “ 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.” (Perry, p. 323). It is more the notion that humans get to choose. He wants to pass along the idea that things around us or for example our lives and actions are not preset and mechanical like Hospers and David Hume identified. All parts according to James, have a confident loose play between them, thus each other doesn’t determine what the others shall be. “ Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbroken, unbending unit of fact” (Lecture).

When it comes explaining this theory, the answers are settled down to a very determined number of selective answers. An example used by James to

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illustrate his point, describes a man walking back home from work: before the fact neither the determinist nor the indeterminist can predict the path that he will take to get home. After the fact although the determinist will claim as of the necessity of the path chosen, the indeterminist will claim that the path was freely chosen. James states that thus far there is no advantage on either side of the argument. The reason being is that, he argues on the nature of the action, there is a certain amount of freedom that an individual has that neither side can predict as of its progress. He chooses the side of indeterminism because he believed that determinism though logically tenable, is pragmatically unacceptable. The overall message that James wants to convey is that of freedom and the ability to think and make choices is a result of one's free will.

What would an indeterminist today think of determinism? An indeterminist will support that with determinism we cannot freely or even solemnly decide, or think without any other restriction. Everything he will state is pre-ordained to happen, and everything is dictated to us. His view states that we are free, and while outside pressure and change might want to affect us, we are the only indicators of choice.

While the question now is, what would a determinist might say? The first statement that he will make is that every choice we make is an illusion of choice, and that we do not have free will. The first back up support that he would use would be the reasoning of biology. Since we are made by our genes, biology, and our environment, everything is far beyond our control. When someone is trying to change certain situations, his decisions would be

based on his already inherent characteristics. If our choices and our decisions are based on our reason, then since reason is the product of our character, and our character part of our environment, then it is predetermined.

An example on that will be when someone comes to the point of “ picking up” the pieces that will in the end make up his identity. Let’s take for example, religion: factors like family, and society will be the determined factors. The counter argument would have been that the decision to either follow or reject the norms was free and not determined since the decision to pick a religion could have been either rejected or observed. The explanation is that yes, the religion choice could have possibly not been observed, but there is no demonstration on this, every decision has its own course and we cannot base facts on alternatives, because alternatives are illusions. This specific determinist conclusion tries to prove that since we cannot tell what will have otherwise happened from an action, then we cannot tell the distinction between hard and soft determinism, and the ability to free will choice.

Looking over both sides of the argument we can see the contradiction that they possess on each other. When the argument bases the support on the influence of the surroundings and the upbringing, and that every decision is caused by certain facts, the counterargument states that this persuasion is been determined by us in which direction we would be persuaded. It is what most will call “ a self-causing agent” that is free to choose and determine its own decisions and the way he would be persuaded by these.

But now the question is what is freedom? or choice? The definitions are clear by indeterminists and unclear by determinists. For example how can someone determine that he is free, but he cannot explain what freedom is in detail. And why would someone keep looking for extra explanations, when freedom is the ability to freely make our own choices.

Now since we looked over the different configurations of both indeterminism and determinism, it would be wise and quite practical to use a real life explanation from a current life occurrence. Let us take as an example our upbringing in this world. From our very young age, we are influenced by outside independent factors. These include our norms, the language we are introduced to, the media, and technology. These factors in combination with the biological agents that we also receive, like our DNA, genes, environment, and biology, make up who we are, and what traits we are to gain and use. For example, we are biologically determined on how we are going to look like without our decision or thought. We are receiving our parents' traits and sometimes talents, brain configurations, and then later on even our own character basis and perspective on life comes from them. Sometimes we even receive diseases and harmful traits that also affect our existence. Looking through this information which is completely unquestionable and supported by all sciences and our environment, we see that there is a predetermined factor that affects our lives.

The question is, to what extent and in what ways these predetermined factors carry on with our lives, affect our free will to make decisions, and in what ways they shape our human consciousness. The other side of things

has to do with all the outside factors that we are used to learn since day one in this world. From a very young age, we are influenced first by our family's environment, which is also our first introduction to norms, culture, and behavior. That which includes, our language, our notions over race, politics, education, and even gender roles. For example when a kid is growing up in a family and in an environment that social media and culture support that women for example are of second nature and that males are the rightful owners of the world, then this kid's ability to function in later life would be based on the feedback he got from his childhood and his actions will focus primarily on what he learned. We actually don't have the ability to choose our family at that young age, so in a sense we are made to grow up in the family and environment that created us. Then the next step that he will move into, with the skills and feedback that he already received from the given traits and the first society experience, is the independent agent of choice. At that time, the individual has the ability to make some choices for his or her life and decisions since the ability to pick between situations is freely given, such include friends, choices, and ideas. But that factor again, will mostly depend on what we already have from our past. Now according to Hospers, some of us have 'characters' that enable us to choose other than the way we were brought up; but not everyone has that 'luck'. He defines freedom and the ability to 'break' from our predestined environment as lucky and that not everyone will have the ability to accomplish that. Thus, the major part of our character is that particular predestined information that controls the aftermath of our characters. But then, the question that comes up is that our choices that we made could be either free (indeterminism), or



driven by what we already got as inherent (determinism). That is where the questions of ideologies began and the whole conversation on whether we are free or not comes from.

Finally, let's go back to the question; Today, are we the solemnly facilitators of our own thoughts and actions, or are we manipulated by society and others? Now that we've looked through both sides of the argument, we can conclude that X has a predetermined past that will influence his life forever, but that he also has the ability to 'break' free from that and create or follow a different path of his choosing. It is understandable when the determinist side argues that we have a predestined destination and life because of all the biological traits that we gain without being our decision. Also when it comes to the side of indeterminism, it also makes sense, that we do take decisions at one point of our lives under our free will and we decide what path we will take. For this topic, and to answer the question completely I don't think we can pose a constructive answer that will target to a specific and aiming answer. Just like philosophy, questions like these, don't have a single path or a single answer, they have sides and perspectives.