

William james versus  
david hume  
philosophy essay



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William James (1842-1910) was one of America's most notable philosophers, however, his work went beyond the boundaries of philosophy (Schick & Vaughn 2009). Born in New York City to a theologian father and the elder brother of famed novelist Henry James, James spent much of his youth studying religion and writing his thoughts on the subject matter with a "lively, clear style that seems more suitable to a novel than a philosophical treatise" (2009), which doesn't seem all that strange considering his brother's talent as a novelist.

James went to school to study art but then changed his course of study to medicine and enrolling in Harvard University (2009). While at Harvard, James would become interested in philosophy -the topics of free will and determinism would especially pique his interest and they would become a lifelong passion for him (2009). Though a passion, James struggled with the issues and he became depressed, even contemplating suicide, while looking for answers to these questions. "

David Hume was a Scottish philosopher born in 1711. He was very much respected by the people who knew him (Schick & Vaughn 2009). He was much more than just a philosopher, however; he was a nobleman, a military attaché, a librarian, an essayist, a historian, a private secretary to the British ambassador in Paris, and an undersecretary of state for Britain (2009).

Hume wrote the *Treatise of Human Nature* while he was in his early twenties (Schick & Vaughn 2009). It is considered to be one of the most important pieces of empiricist philosophy though its importance was not seen at the time and Hume could not find work in any philosophy department (2009).

However, Hume later became a librarian in Edinburgh and while there he wrote the History of England, “ which established him as one of the greatest literary figures of his time” (2009).

Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature attempted to develop empiricism by using scientific methods to study human nature. He thought that in order to progress we had to get rid of any kind of abstract metaphysical ideas. By observing individuals in the world, we can learn more about human nature itself. The way to do this is to try and figure out what causes people to believe in what they believe. Metaphysical explanations aren’t good enough when it comes to philosophy – rather, philosophy should try to help explain why individuals believe in what they believe. This is what he attempted to accomplish in his Treatise of Human Nature (Kemerling 2002).

In 1890 James published The Principles of Psychology, a book that separated psychology as its own scientific discipline. Psychology would now have its own studies dedicated to its progression as well as its own publications and its own laboratories for carrying out experiments (Passer & Smith 2009).

James created his own branch of psychology – functionalism – which was more of a pragmatic take on psychology. He focused on the function of the mind (“ what for”) as opposed to focusing on structure or elements (“ what is”) (2009). As well as being a leader in psychology, James was also a philosopher who thought that the knowledge of physiology was vital (2009).

He had many contributions to the field of psychology, including ideas about how consciousness evolved as a function, an emphasis on experience of the self as a stream of consciousness rather than separate perceptions, analysis

of ‘ habits’, and the development of the James-Lange theory of emotion in <https://assignbuster.com/william-james-versus-david-hume-philosophy-essay/>

which awareness of the response is thought to be the emotion (e. g., the emotion ' fear' is the awareness that I'm running away and my heart is beating fast (Passer & Smith 2009).

James wrote a lot about the importance of the self. He believed that oftentimes the presence of the self is so subtle that the stuff inside the mind dominate consciousness as they stream along.

Hume was an empiricist who had a profound interest in emotion. He had the idea that reason is " the slave of passions" (Passer & Smith 2009). Like James, Hume also was a philosopher with interest in the study of psychology. Hume believed that the self was a series of ideas. That means that when a person looks inside him or herself, they are not going to see a " self" but rather a person will see that there are many ideas and thoughts that make up the actual self. These ideas are quite direct and vivid and they come straight from our immediate experiences (Kemerling 2002). He posited that ideas become association according to these laws: resemblance, contiguity, and cause or effect (2009). This way of thinking means that we, as people, might think that " the movement of one billiard ball causes another ball to move on a table is not necessarily an individual's experience of what is happening in reality" (2009). The connection of one idea to another (as in the case of the billiard balls) is something that is a result of an association that we create ourselves, but it does not equal a truth (2010). Since every single idea comes from an " antecedent impression" (2002), we have to ask questions about the origins of these ideas by asking where impressions come from (2002). All of our beliefs come from associations that are consistently and constantly repeated (2002). This essentially led to Hume believing that <https://assignbuster.com/william-james-versus-david-hume-philosophy-essay/>

we could never know who we really are, that is, we can never truly know the self. He expounded on this in the *Treatise*. While we may think that we have an idea of our “self,” it is simply not reality because it is based on associations that have been implanted in our minds. The self is simply groups of associations.

James and Hume were different in that James wanted to clarify that his ideas of self had a very firm biological foundation. He did not want his idea of “self” to be erroneously seen as a metaphysical knowing agency (Damasio 2010). However, despite this he still recognized a knowing function for the self, even when the function was subtle (2010). Hume, on the contrary, beat the self to the point that it was nearly gone (2010). Hume said: “I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception” (2010). Then, “I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perceptual flux and movement” (2010).

Hume believed that while we may think that two things happen because of another thing (i. e., cause and effect), there is no real way for us to ever know if the two are connected. Hume did a great deal of arguing when it came to the uncertainty of causation. He thought that while people may think that one thing certainly causes the other, it is just as possible that the one thing did not cause the other to occur. Rather, people begin to associate things together which then makes us believe that one happens because of the other. But, Hume thought that this was just habitual and that it had absolutely nothing to do with why things happen.

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Hume thought that religion gives people the idea that the world works based on cause and effect. Therefore, what is the first cause? It would have to be God. Hume did not adhere to this way of thinking. He thought that religion makes people think that the first cause is God, but there is really no way of knowing this. We don't know for sure if there is a first cause and this means we can't be sure of God. Hume thought that rationally speaking there was no place for God in the world and, moreover, that the universe and its order doesn't prove that God exists. Furthermore, if we are to believe that God created the world in an orderly manner and then we go on to try and create order in our world (that was created by God), we are like God in the way he thinks – even though God may be a bit smarter. We still are a lot like him, or at least he created us to be like him. In order for this to be true, order can only occur as an effect of design. However, there is order in things that seem utterly senseless. In order to believe that God created the universe, we still can't know anything about God. We can't tell anything about him from design – at least in the way that we have come to believe that he is (i. e., supreme, righteous, holy, etc.). Hume thought that the fact that evil exists means that if God does exist, he cannot possibly be all the things that we believe. It means that God is not as powerful as we want to believe he is because he cannot do away with the evil that exists in our world.

James believed that belief in God could be contemplated in terms of “live and dead hypotheses” (James 2010). He argues that when one is trying to find an argument for God existing or God not existing, we must consider three things: 1) Living or dead 2) Forced or unavoidable; And, 3) Momentous or trivial. He says, “and for our purposes we may call an option a genuine

option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind" (2010). For James, a living option is when there are two hypotheses that are "live ones" (2010). He says that if he were to say that someone should become a theosophist or a Mohammedan, the option is probably dead since for that person both hypotheses seem dead. Though if he were to tell a person to be agnostic or be Christian, the person is trained in some way to follow a certain belief (2010).

The next example he gives is to tell a person to either go outside with an umbrella or don't. There is not a "genuine option, for it is not forced" (James 2010). The person could choose to not go outside at all. Along those same lines, if he told a person, "love me or hate me," "call my theory true or call it false," there is an option that is avoidable since the person could remain indifferent (2010). However, if he were to say, "accept this truth or go without it" (2010), the option is forced because one cannot do anything else. "Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind" (2010).

Lastly, he explains the difference between momentous and trivial. He says that an option is momentous when a person has the chance to do something that is unique. "He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed" (James 2010). The option is trivial when the opportunity isn't all that unique or when the stakes are not that significant, or if the decision is reversible (2010).

James believes that people can choose to believe in something or they can choose not to believe, or they even choose to wait to believe in something,

but in choosing one of these things, they are essentially choosing their own fate. James was an adamant believer in free will. He thought that by changing our thoughts, we could essentially change our lives. While he believed in free will though, he also couldn't help but see that people who believed in determinism had a very strong argument. Because of this, his arguments on determinism weren't really that powerful. Rather, his argument for free will was very powerful. This is the way in which he showed where his beliefs lay. Free will for James was simply more rational than determinism. It was also a much more positive way to see life and the universe at large. Because of the fact that he was a pragmatist as well, his views on morality lay in the idea that we should act in the ways that make sense to us as individuals. There wasn't a strong argument made by James it seems when it comes to free will either. He simply tells his audience what he believes and why he believes it (free will because it is more optimistic and he can make sense of his life that way). His belief in free will plays into his ideas on ethics because it all comes down to people deciding how they want to act, who they want to be in the world, and all this comes down to rational reasoning.

James essentially believed that any true belief is one that is useful to the believer. Truth is that which works in the way of belief. " True ideas lead us into useful verbal and conceptual quarters as well as directly up to useful sensible termini. They lead to consistency, stability and flowing human intercourse" but " all true process must lead to the face of directly verifying sensible experiences somewhere" (James 1907). This means that the value



of truth relies upon its usefulness to the person who holds it and this was the whole idea behind pragmatism (Cryer 2010).

When it comes to free will versus determinism, Hume thought that there wasn't any single action that could be deemed random. He thought that everything that we (humans) do is dictated by the way we were raised as well as our psyches - but only to a certain extent. He went back to his cause and effect theories by saying that there is quite a strong cause and effect relationship between nature and our own actions. In essence, he is saying that people are predictable and that people don't often stray from their predictability, which is what takes away our free will and makes determinism a very valid argument.

When it comes to ethics, Hume believed that these came from utility as opposed to God's will. These are things that cannot be found in a scientific way. There are some things that people choose to do and there are some things that people don't choose to do and those are always different depending on the individual. What is right for one person may not be right for another. Our ethics have to do with our own ideas about what we think is right not only for ourselves but for the rest of mankind. He believed that people do, overall, tend to sympathize with others and that we are made this way.

Hume was also of the belief that reason does not play a part in our ethical decision - that is, we don't reason when it comes to deciding what we are going to do or not do. He thought that humans reacted or acted according to their passions. Reason is not what motivates people to act.

While Hume and James varied on many of their theories regarding ethics, God, free will and determinism, they are two philosophers that are oftentimes compared and contrasted by philosophers. Both philosophers have changed the way that individuals view themselves, their “ selves,” the way they view the existence of God and evil, as well as the purpose of man in the world. Are we here for a reason and can we guide our lives? Or is everything predetermined? While they varied in their theories on these topics, both have compelling arguments for the student of philosophy.