The Thoughtful Will

David Perkins, Harvard Graduate School of Education, presentation at the 13th International Conference on Thinking, Norrkoping, Sweden, 17-21 June, 2007
Guarantee

Double your Willpower
or No Money Back
Akrasia

Ακρασία
We think how late we shall be, how the duties of the day will suffer; we say, “I must get up, this is ignominious,” etc.; but still the warm couch feels too delicious, the cold outside too cruel, and resolution faints away and postpones itself again and again just as it seemed on the verge of bursting the resistance and passing over into the decisive act.

— William James, *Principles of Psychology*, 1890
I can resist anything but temptation

— Oscar Wilde
Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

...

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow.

— The Hollow Men, T. S. Eliot
Good thinking...

Deciding what to do

NOT getting ourselves to do it
What is the will?
What is the will?

- Empty folk psychology
- Freedom from determinism
- Willpower
What is the will?

The thoughtful will
What is the will?

Empty folk psychology or a resource for self-management
The case against the will

Empty folk psychology

sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic
The case against the will

The false hope syndrome

The case for the will: the pedigree

- Classic and contemporary sources
  - Aristotle
  - William James
  - Roy Baumeister

- Travels under other names
  - Volition, self-control, self-regulation, conation
The case for the will: The two minds

The doing mind

The planning mind
(anticipatory planning, Peter Gardenfors)
The case for the will: the two minds

No mind
The case for the will: the two minds

Doing mind
The case for the will: the two minds

Doing mind and planning mind
The case for the will: the two minds

The trouble with two minds
The case for the will: Overuse

The “ego depletion” model

What is the will?

Folk psychology → Real resource
What is the will?

Freedom from determinism or freedom from impulse
Free will as freedom from determinism

Omniscient god and human choice
Free will as freedom from determinism

Classical physics and quantum physics
Free will as freedom from determinism

Neural precursors to conscious intentions
Free will as freedom from impulse

Not being “sphexish”

Free will worth having (Elbow Room, Daniel Dennett)

William James too...

It is as easy physically to avoid a fight as to begin one, to pocket one’s money as to squander it on one’s cupidities, to walk away from as towards a coquette’s door. ... In all this one sees how the immediate point of application of the volitional effort lies exclusively in the mental world. The whole drama is a mental drama.
What is the will?

Freed from determinism  $\rightarrow$  Free from impulse
What is the will?

The power will versus the thoughtful will
The power will
The power will

❖ A persistent concept
❖ The tempting 'mental muscle' metaphor
❖ Exercise that muscle

…the man who has accustomed himself steadily, for day after day, to concentrate his attention, to wield his energy, for instance, not to spend money on unnecessary things, will be well rewarded by his effort. When disasters occur, he will stand firm as a rock even though faced on all sides by ruin, while his companions in distress will be swept aside as the chaff from the sieve.

- William James
But...

- Ego depletion
- The false hope syndrome
- Will out of gas
The thoughtful will

- Toe in the water
- Jump in
Thoughtful will: Change your world

- Support people
  (AA, mentor, coach, minister)

- Reminders
  (progress charts, religious icons, inspirational figures)

- Remove temptations

- Public commitment
Thoughtful will: Change your approach

- Small steps or jump in
- Set milestones
- Reward yourself
- Specific plans (implementation intentions)
- Abstract coding ('why' not 'what')
Thoughtful will: Change yourself

- Deconditioning
- New habits
- Reframing, re-visioning
- Autosuggestion
- Self-talk
Thoughtful will: The fly in the ointment

Complex thought is ego depleting
What is the will?

Power will  \(\rightarrow\)  Thoughtful will
What is the will?
What is the will?

Empty folk concept → Real resource

Free from determinism → Free from impulse

Power will → Thoughtful will
Good thinking...

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AND getting ourselves to do it
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