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Features

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Sideshow: The determination of free will

by [Gary Saul Morson](#)

On the complexities of the human experience.

Year after year, students in my class on the Russian novel have told me that my lectures directly contradict what they learn in other courses, especially in the social sciences. My lectures explicate Dostoevsky's ideas about free choice and responsibility and examine Tolstoy's belief that events are fundamentally contingent and uncertain. Elsewhere, these writers' ideas are dismissed as pre-scientific superstitions. At last, a few students organized a debate between me and a popular psychology professor.

That professor began his Introduction to Psychology with the statement: "Science has shown there is no such thing as the soul." He compared belief in free will, or anything else that contradicted an iron determinism, to faith in "little green men on Mars." The concept of freedom was simply a relic of the religious past. Most students accepted this view, although they worried that it seem ...

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