

Free will versus determinism

Key Terms

Term	Definition	Example
<i>Free will</i>		
<i>Determinism</i>		
<i>Hard determinism</i>		
<i>Soft determinism</i>		
<i>Biological determinism</i>		
<i>Environmental determinism</i>		
<i>Psychic determinism</i>		

The Free will versus Determinism Arguments

	Free will	Determinism
<i>Strengths of the position</i>		
<i>Weaknesses of the position</i>		

Free will versus Determinism Notes

Use the textbook **and** Topic Companion. Read through **both** as they give you different examples, extra detail in the definitions and more evaluation to support 16-mark essays.

- ☐ Make sure you have full definitions for the key terms with examples of each one from psychology. Ensure you can explain why your example is an example of e.g., environmental determinism. Your examples could be studies, real life cases, etc.
- ☐ Develop 2-3 arguments for and against free will, and 2-3 arguments for and against determinism.

Determinism

*Determinism is the view that **free will is an illusion**, and that our **behaviour is governed by internal or external forces** over which we have no control. Consequently, our behaviour is viewed as predictable.*

Hard Determinism

...is the view that forces outside of our control (e.g. biology or past experience) shape our behaviour. Hard determinism is seen as incompatible with free will.

Soft Determinism

...is the view behaviour is constrained by the environment or biological make-up, but only to a certain extent and that there is an element of free will in all behaviour.

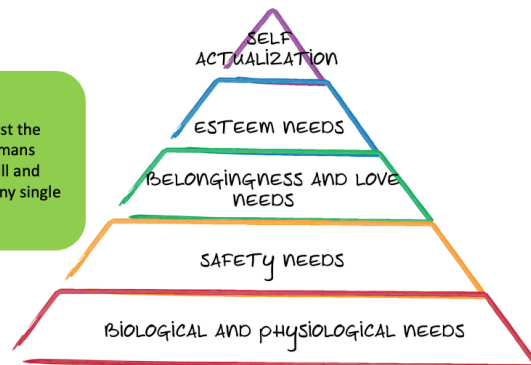
Free Will

*Free will is the idea that we can play an **active role** and have **choice** in how we behave. The assumption is that individuals are free to choose their behaviour and are self-determined.*

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Year 2 – Approaches in Psychology: Humanist psychologists argue against the determinism view, claiming that humans have self-determination and free will and that behaviour is not the result of any single cause.



Biological Determinism



▪ **Biological determinism** refers to the idea that all human behaviour is innate and determined by genes.

Year 1 – Psychopathology: The biological approach suggests that OCD is partly genetic. **Nestadt et al. (2000)** found that people with first-degree relatives who suffer from OCD are five times more likely to suffer from OCD at some point in their lives.

Environmental Determinism



▪ **Environmental determinism** is the view that behaviour is caused by forces outside the individual. Therefore, behaviour is caused by previous experience learned through classical and operant conditioning.

Year 1 – Psychopathology: The behaviourist approach suggests that phobias are acquired through **classical conditioning** and maintained through **operant conditioning** and therefore, to some extent, environmentally determined.

Psychic Determinism



▪ **Psychic determinism** claims that human behaviour is the result of childhood experiences and innate drives (ID, Ego and Superego), as in Freud's model of psychological development.

Year 2 – Gender/Forensic: The psychodynamic approach suggests that **gender behaviours** are acquired during the phallic stage of development, through the resolution of the Oedipus Complex or Electra complex, where children identify with the same sex parent.

Multiple Choice Questions

Which two of the following statements describes a free will point of view? [2 marks]

- A People are not responsible for their own actions
- B People behave in a random fashion
- C Behaviour always has a cause
- D People exercise full choice over how they behave
- E People have no choice about how to act

Short Answer

Explain what is meant by hard determinism and soft determinism. [4 marks]

Applied

"Research suggests that depression runs in the family. However, many depressed people also have other issues, including social problems, or problems with drink or drugs. Despite these challenges, many depressed people overcome their depression and find ways to resolve their issues." **With reference to the extract above, explain what is meant by 'determinism'. Refer to at least two types of determinism in your answer. [6 marks]**

Essay

Discuss the free will and determinism debate in psychology [16 marks]

Evaluation

Practical value

One strength of free will (rather than determinism) is its practical value.

The common-sense view is that we exercise free choice in our everyday lives on a daily basis. However, even if this is not the case, *thinking* we do exercise free choice can improve our mental health. A study by Rebecca Roberts *et al.* (2000) looked at adolescents who had a strong belief in fatalism – that their lives were ‘decided’ by events outside of their control. The study found that these adolescents were at **significantly** greater risk of developing **depression**. It seems that people who exhibit an external, rather than internal, **locus of control** are less likely to be optimistic.

This suggests that, even if we do not have free will, the fact that we believe we do may have a positive impact on mind and behaviour.

Research evidence

One limitation of free will is that brain scan evidence does not support it but does support determinism.

Benjamin Libet *et al.* (1983) instructed participants to choose a random moment to flick their wrist while he measured activity in their brain (‘readiness potential’). Participants had to say when they felt the conscious will to move. Libet found that the unconscious brain activity leading up to the conscious decision to move came around half a second *before* the participant consciously felt they had decided to move.

This may be interpreted as meaning that even our most basic experiences of free will are actually determined by our brain before we are aware of them (a thought that could keep you awake at night if you dwell on it!).

Counterpoint However, Libet’s findings showing that the brain is involved in decision-making is not surprising and is, in fact, just as we would expect. Just because the action comes before the conscious awareness of the decision to act, doesn’t mean that there was no decision to act – just that the decision to act took time to reach consciousness. Our conscious awareness of the decision is simply a ‘read-out’ of our unconscious decision-making.

This suggests this evidence is not appropriate as a challenge to free will.

The law

One limitation of determinism (and strength of free will) is the position of the legal system on responsibility.

The hard determinist stance is that individual choice is not the cause of behaviour. This is not consistent with the way in which our legal system operates. In a court of law, offenders are held responsible for their actions. Indeed, the main principle of our legal system is that a defendant exercised their free will in committing the crime (see top right).

This suggests that, in the real world, determinist arguments do not work.

Evaluation extra

Do we want determinism?

Determinist approaches helped establish psychology as a science. In addition, hard determinism (such as the biological and behaviourist approaches) has produced many effective real-world applications. These include therapies and behavioural interventions.

However, free will has intuitive appeal. Most of us see ourselves as making our own choices rather than being ‘pushed’ by forces we cannot control. Free will may also be liberating for some people in terms of ‘not accepting one’s fate’ – if they come from a criminal background or there is mental disorder in their family, for instance.

Consider: Which of the two approaches should psychology pursue?

Evaluating the free will and determinism debate

- One limitation of the deterministic view is that there is research to challenge it. For example, identical twin studies typically find an 80% similarity in intelligence scores and a 40% similarity in the likelihood of depression. However, as identical twins share 100% of their genes, these results suggest that 20% is caused by other (environmental) factors. This demonstrates that biological determinism is unable to explain any behaviour, in this case, depression and intelligence. The same evidence indicates that no behaviour is completely environmentally determined. If identical twins only show an 80% likeness in terms of intelligence, it is therefore assumed that only 20% is caused by the environment.
- One limitation of the deterministic view is that it is not compatible with the legal system. If behaviour is determined by outside forces, that provides a potential excuse for criminal acts. For example, in 1981 Stephen Mobley argued that he was ‘born to kill’ after killing a pizza shop manager because his family had a disposition towards violence and aggressive behaviour. An American court rejected this argument. Therefore, a truly determinist position may be undesirable as it provides an ‘excuse’, allowing people to mitigate their liability.
- One strength of the deterministic view is that there is research to support it. **Libet *et al.* (1983)** found that the motor regions of the brain become active before a person registers conscious awareness of a decision, i.e. the decision to move their finger when asked to press a button was actually a pre-determined action of the brain. This strongly suggests that many responses are biologically determined and that although we may believe that we have free will, claims that free will is an illusion may be correct.
- One limitation of the free will view is that it is not compatible with the aims of science. When we research behaviours, nomothetic approaches help to establish general laws of behaviour and to make predictions about development and behaviour. However, if behaviour is the result of free will rather than determinism, then such predictions would not be possible. Therefore, free will ideology is not regarded as scientific. Despite this, it is now accepted that there is no such thing as hard determinism in science. This type of determinism seemed more appropriate in the 18th and 19th centuries when most physicists believed they would eventually be able to make very precise and accurate predictions about everything relevant to physics.