# Determinism versus free-will

Lesson 7.1.7 | A Level issues, debates and methods

## Core ideas

Determinism is the view that behaviour is caused by factors such as biology, learning, unconscious processes, culture or the situation.

Free-will is the view that people can make meaningful choices and are not completely controlled by internal or external causes.

Hard determinism argues that behaviour is fully caused and that free-will is an illusion.

Soft determinism accepts that behaviour has causes but allows that people may still choose within limits.

Scientific psychology often looks for causes so that behaviour can be explained, predicted and changed.

A fully deterministic account can be criticised for ignoring responsibility, personal agency and cases where people resist pressure or change behaviour.

## Key terms

**Determinism:** The view that behaviour is caused by factors beyond free choice.

**Free-will:** The idea that people can make meaningful choices about their behaviour.

**Hard determinism:** The view that behaviour is fully caused and free-will is an illusion.

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**Soft determinism:** The view that behaviour has causes but people still have some choice within limits.

**Biological determinism:** Explaining behaviour through genes, brain activity, hormones or other biological causes.

**Environmental determinism:** Explaining behaviour through learning, reinforcement, social pressure or surroundings.

**Agency:** A person's capacity to act intentionally and make choices.

**Responsibility:** Being accountable for behaviour or decisions.

## Further detail and evidence

Determinism proposes that behaviour follows causes. Biological determinism emphasises physical/inherited processes; environmental determinism emphasises learning and circumstances; psychic determinism emphasises unconscious processes. Strong/hard determinism allows little meaningful choice.

Free will concerns the capacity to choose and act intentionally. Soft determinism/compatibilism accepts causal influences while allowing agency within constraints. Feeling free is not itself proof that no prior cause influenced the decision.

A probabilistic finding is not inevitability. Genetic vulnerability, rewards and social influence can change likelihood without forcing every person to act the same way. Therapy and planning can support agency while recognising barriers and unconscious influences.

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## Applying the ideas

A consumer responding to an anchor may feel fully deliberate. A person resisting a compulsion can learn alternative responses even when intrusive thoughts are unwanted. Explain which behaviour is being discussed: onset of an urge and choice of a later response need not receive the same account.

**Worked example:** After repeated praise for taking risks, a worker keeps ignoring safety rules. Later, after a serious near miss, they choose to follow the procedure even when peers joke about it. How does this scenario show both sides of the debate? The early risk-taking can be explained deterministically because reinforcement and peer approval shaped the worker's behaviour. The later decision supports free-will or soft determinism because the worker reflects on the near miss and chooses a safer action despite social pressure. A balanced answer would say behaviour is influenced by causes, but people may still make choices within those pressures.

## Evaluation and connections

Deterministic theories support prediction and scientific testing, but can understate lived choice and responsibility. Strong free-will claims can neglect coercion, illness and access barriers. Compare specific mechanisms and limits of prediction; exceptions to a group trend do not automatically refute every causal influence.