8.4 Free Will and Determinism: Philosophical Positions

AQA 7182 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer all questions. For short-answer items give concise sentences; the final 16-mark essay should be written in full sentences. Suggested time 60 minutes.

1 Define hard determinism and summarise its claim.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 State one legal implication of accepting hard determinism and give a reason.

(Total for Question 2 is 3 marks)

3 Distinguish between hard and soft determinism with two differences.

(Total for Question 3 is 3 marks)

4 Identify one philosophical position that could explain Amina's behaviour and justify this interpretation using her public statement and private belief.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 Explain how a humanistic free will therapist conceptualises change and give two practice implications.

(Total for Question 5 is 6 marks)

6 Discuss the free will versus determinism debate in psychology, covering free will, hard determinism and soft determinism, with implications and evaluation.

(Total for Question 6 is 16 marks)

7 Explain why William James is classed as a soft determinist.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Outline one strength of the humanistic free will perspective and its practical value.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

9 Explain one weakness of hard determinism regarding moral responsibility and legal practice.

(Total for Question 9 is 4 marks)

Mark scheme · 8.4 Free Will and Determinism: Philosophical Positions

Question 1

identifies the viewpoint as hard determinism cao	**B1**
states the claim that all behaviour is caused by prior events so free will is an illusion oe	**B1**

Answer: Hard determinism is the position that all behaviour is fully determined by prior causes and therefore true free will does not exist.

Question 2

states an implication such as reduced emphasis on punishment, more focus on treatment or rehabilitation, or a shift in blame allocation cao	**B1**
explains why, e.g. if behaviour is seen as caused, punishment as moral blame is less defensible oe	**M1**
links to legal practice, e.g. sentencing might prioritise public safety and rehabilitation over retribution oe	**A1**

Answer: One implication is reduced emphasis on retributive punishment and greater focus on treatment or rehabilitation, because if behaviour is seen as caused by prior factors, legal responses would shift towards managing risk and addressing causes rather than moral blame.

Question 3

difference 1: hard determinism denies genuine free will, soft determinism allows limited conscious choice oe	**M1**
difference 2: hard determinism implies reduced moral responsibility since actions are fully caused, soft determinism preserves a notion of responsibility by allowing deliberate choice within constraints oe	**M1**
both differences clearly linked to psychological explanation or consequences oe	**A1**

Answer: Hard determinism denies genuine free will and so challenges moral responsibility, whereas soft determinism accepts causal influences but allows limited conscious choice and so preserves a conditional notion of responsibility.

Question 4

identifies a relevant philosophical position, e.g. soft determinism, hard determinism or libertarian free will; accept any of these with a coherent justification	**B1**
applies the position to Amina's public agreement despite private disagreement, e.g. she faces pressure to conform, oe	**M1**
explains the role of choice or causation consistently with the chosen position: constrained choice for soft determinism; behaviour and private belief caused by prior factors for hard determinism; a free decision to agree publicly for libertarian free will, oe	**A1**
develops the justification using the public/private distinction, e.g. for soft determinism social influence may shape her statement without removing choice; for hard determinism both her statement and private belief may have causes; for free will she may choose her public response despite private disagreement. The scenario does not prove one position over the others, oe	**A1**

Answer: Several interpretations are defensible. Soft determinism: social pressure influences Amina's statement, but she may still choose to agree publicly while retaining her private view. Hard determinism: both her public response and private belief can be understood as caused by prior factors. Libertarian free will: she may freely choose public agreement despite private disagreement. Credit a coherent, developed application of the chosen position; the public/private split alone does not establish free will or determinism.

Question 5

explains the conceptualisation, e.g. change arises from the client's autonomous choices and striving for self actualisation oe	**M1**
states first practice implication, e.g. therapist offers unconditional positive regard and non directive support to foster client choice oe	**M1**
explains how this fosters change, e.g. reduces conditions of worth so client can choose congruent values and behaviours oe	**A1**
states second practice implication, e.g. focus on empathy and active listening to help client reflect and decide on goals oe	**M1**
explains how this supports autonomous change, e.g. promotes self awareness and commitment to personally chosen goals oe	**A1**
gives a brief consequence or evaluation, e.g. often increases motivation but may be less directive where clients need structure oe	**A1**

Answer: Rogers would see change as arising from the client's autonomous choices towards self actualisation. The therapist provides unconditional positive regard and a non directive stance so the client feels free to choose, and uses empathy and reflective listening so the client gains self awareness and commits to personally chosen goals; this can increase motivation though it may be less directive for clients needing more structure.

Question 6

Level 4 Knowledge is accurate and detailed, showing clear understanding of free will, hard determinism and soft determinism. The discussion is balanced and evaluative, considering implications for moral responsibility and therapy with well developed strengths and limitations. Arguments are supported with examples and the answer is coherent and uses specialist terminology appropriately.	**13-16**
Level 3 Knowledge is mostly accurate with some detail. There is clear evaluation and consideration of implications, though some points may be less developed. Examples are used and the answer is generally organised with relevant terminology.	**9-12**
Level 2 Knowledge of the positions is present but limited or partly inaccurate. Evaluation is superficial or one sided. Implications may be stated but not well developed. Organisation and use of terminology may be inconsistent.	**5-8**
Level 1 Very limited knowledge and little or no evaluation. Points likely to be brief, fragmentary or listed with little development. Specialist terminology is missing or used incorrectly.	**1-4**
Level 0 No creditable content.	**0**

Indicative content:

- AO1: Define free will as the view that individuals can make conscious, self determined choices; humanistic psychologists Rogers and Maslow emphasise personal agency and self actualisation.
- AO1: Define hard determinism as the view that behaviour is fully caused by prior events and that free will is an illusion; note philosophical implications that blame and moral responsibility are challenged.
- AO1: Define soft determinism or compatibilism as the view that causal forces constrain behaviour but that conscious choice can operate meaningfully within those constraints, associated historically with William James.
- AO3: Evaluate free will, strength: supports moral responsibility and underpins therapeutic approaches that empower clients, such as client centred therapy; this matters because it leads to positive personal change and ethical practice.
- AO3: Evaluate free will, limitation: may lack coherent scientific account of causation and can be accused of being overly optimistic about agency in the face of powerful influences; this matters for explanatory power in psychology.
- AO3: Evaluate hard determinism, strength: offers clear causal explanations and fits a scientific, predictive model of behaviour, which can help in identifying causes and interventions.
- AO3: Evaluate hard determinism, limitation: undermines moral responsibility and the practice of blaming individuals, which raises ethical and legal concerns; also it may conflict with ordinary experience of choice.
- AO3: Evaluate soft determinism, strength: reconciles the need for causal explanation with a preserved notion of agency and responsibility, useful in applied settings where both explanation and choice matter.
- AO3: Evaluate soft determinism, limitation: may be vague about how much freedom exists and can be accused of accommodating both sides without providing clear criteria, reducing predictive clarity.
- AO3: Consider implications for therapy and law: free will supports empowerment and responsibility in therapy, hard determinism suggests focus on treatment and mitigation rather than blame, soft determinism supports conditional responsibility and mixed approaches in practice.
- AO3: Consider empirical and philosophical challenges, such as the intuitions of choice, the need for operational definitions, and how different positions affect research aims and ethical practice in psychology.
- AO3: Conclude with a balanced judgement, for example that soft determinism offers a pragmatic reconciliation but that acknowledging the strengths and limits of each position is important for ethical and effective psychological practice.

Question 7

states that James accepted some causal constraints on behaviour oe	**M1**
states that James also argued for a role for conscious decision or will within those constraints oe	**M1**
explains that this combination of causation plus meaningful choice is the core of compatibilism/soft determinism oe	**A1**
gives a brief example or consequence, e.g. choosing between options within situational limits oe	**A1**

Answer: James accepted that prior causes influence behaviour but also argued people can make meaningful conscious choices within those limits; this combination of constraint plus choice is why his view is classed as soft determinism.

Question 8

states a plausible strength, e.g. it values individual agency and subjective experience oe	**M1**
explains how this leads to positive practical outcomes, e.g. client centred therapy encourages choice and empowerment, improving motivation and wellbeing oe	**A1**
adds supporting detail such as enhancement of self efficacy or therapeutic alliance oe	**M1**
explains why this matters, e.g. increases likelihood of sustained behaviour change because clients feel ownership of goals oe	**A1**

Answer: A strength is that the humanistic free will perspective values individual agency and subjective experience; applied to therapy this encourages empowerment and self chosen goals, strengthening motivation and the therapeutic alliance and making change more likely to be sustained.

Question 9

identifies a weakness, e.g. it undermines moral responsibility or could excuse harmful behaviour oe	**M1**
explains the mechanism, e.g. if behaviour is wholly caused, blaming or punishing seems unjustified oe	**M1**
applies this to a practical domain, e.g. criminal justice or clinical judgement where responsibility affects sentencing or treatment oe	**A1**
explains why this matters, e.g. social protections and deterrence may be weakened if all actions are seen as unfree oe	**A1**

Answer: A weakness is that hard determinism undermines moral responsibility: if actions are wholly caused, blaming or punishing may seem unjustified, which raises problems for legal sentencing and clinical judgement where notions of responsibility matter for treatment and public protection.