



PERSONALITY THEORIES ON FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

Selvaraj Nallathambi

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Periyar University, Salem, Tamilnadu.

Abstract

The question of whether humans control their lives remains a central debate in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. The controversy between free will and determinism has major implications for understanding personality, moral responsibility, and human development. This review examines how personality theories address the tension between freedom and constraint. Psychoanalytic theory stresses unconscious determinism, while behaviorism emphasizes environmental control, both limiting agency. In contrast, humanistic and existential approaches affirm personal freedom, self-actualization, and meaning-making. Trait theories, grounded in biology and genetics, recognize structural determinants but also highlight adaptability across the lifespan. Cognitive and social-cognitive perspectives advance compatibilist positions, suggesting that individuals, though shaped by cognitive and environmental factors, exercise agency through reflection, self-efficacy, and reinterpretation of experience. Rather than a strict dichotomy, personality psychology views free will and determinism as existing on a continuum, dynamically interacting to shape behavior. The implications of this synthesis extend to psychotherapy, education, and moral responsibility, underscoring the value of integrating both perspectives. Ultimately, evidence suggests that humans are simultaneously determined and free—shaped by external forces yet capable of transcending them through conscious choice and meaning creation.

Keywords: *Free Will, Determinism, Personality Theories, Humanistic Psychology.*

Introduction

The question of whether humans genuinely control their lives remains a central debate in philosophy and psychology. At its core is the issue of whether individuals possess free will—the ability to make autonomous choices independent of causal constraints—or whether behavior is governed by deterministic forces such as biological drives, environmental contingencies, or unconscious processes. This debate carries implications for moral responsibility, legal accountability, therapy, and human development (Baumeister, 2008; Nahmias, 2015; Shariff et al., 2014). If humans lack agency, responsibility loses meaning; conversely, if they are entirely free, psychology and biology risk losing explanatory power.

Personality theories provide a valuable lens for this debate, as they explore the origins and stability of thought, emotion, and behavior. Some stress determinism, while others emphasize freedom, intentionality, and creativity (Cloninger, 2019; McAdams, 2021). Freud's psychoanalytic theory offered a strong endorsement of determinism, portraying behavior as shaped by unconscious desires and early experiences (Freud, 1923/1961; Eagle, 2011). Jung and Erikson introduced greater conscious adaptation (Jung, 1964; Erikson, 1950/1993). Behaviorism reinforced determinism: Skinner (1953) argued behavior is conditioned by reinforcement, with free will as illusion, though critics saw this as overly reductionist (Baum, 2017; Bandura, 2001).

Humanistic psychology countered with a more optimistic account. Rogers (1961) emphasized self-actualization and authenticity, while Maslow (1968) described a hierarchy where freedom emerges once needs are met. Both affirmed autonomy despite constraints (Schunk et al., 2022). Cognitive and social-cognitive theories offered compatibilist perspectives. Bandura's (1989) reciprocal determinism



and self-efficacy (1997), alongside Rotter's (1966) locus of control, showed that agency operates within environmental and cognitive influences. Existential psychology most strongly affirmed freedom. Frankl (1963) argued that even under extreme constraints, individuals could choose meaning; May (1981) emphasized responsibility as central to humanity. Overall, personality theories reveal that humans are neither wholly determined nor fully free, but shaped by a dynamic interplay of constraint and agency (Baumeister, 2008; Kane, 2011; McAdams, 2021).

2. The Free Will–Determinism Debate: Philosophical and Psychological Roots

Free Will

Free will is generally defined as the capacity to make genuine choices not wholly dictated by prior causes or external constraints (Kane, 2011). Across philosophy, from Augustine to Sartre, it has been seen as the foundation of moral responsibility. Sartre (1943/1993) famously argued that humans are “condemned to be free,” underscoring radical autonomy despite situational limits. Psychologically, free will is tied to self-determination, volition, and intentional self-change, enabling individuals to pursue goals and align behavior with values (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Determinism

Determinism holds that every event, including human action, is causally necessitated by prior conditions (Spinoza, 1677/1994). Perspectives include:

1. **Hard determinism:** All actions are caused, leaving no true freedom.
2. **Soft determinism/compatibilism:** Freedom is acting according to one's desires, though shaped by prior causes (Hume, 1748/2007; Dennett, 2003).
3. **Fatalism:** Outcomes are fixed, regardless of effort.

In psychology, determinism is reflected in Freud's psychoanalysis, which emphasized unconscious forces and early experiences (Freud, 1923/1961), Skinner's behaviorism, which stressed environmental control (Skinner, 1971), and Eysenck's biological model, which highlighted innate predispositions (Eysenck, 1967). These approaches show how choices may be constrained by both internal and external factors.

Compatibilist and Middle Grounds

Many contemporary thinkers adopt compatibilist perspectives, recognizing that freedom exists within constraints (Dennett, 2003; Baumeister, 2008). In psychology, Bandura's reciprocal determinism (1986) illustrates this balance, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of cognition, environment, and behavior. Human freedom is thus not absolute but emerges from reflection, motivation, and contextual factors, allowing individuals to shape their lives even within structural limitations.

3. Personality Theories as a Framework

Personality theories provide diverse frameworks for understanding human behavior, each rooted in distinct assumptions about causality and autonomy. Examining these perspectives reveals psychology's contributions to the free will–determinism debate.

Psychoanalytic Theory emphasizes unconscious drives and intrapsychic conflicts, leaning toward determinism. Freud (1923/1961) argued that unconscious wishes and early experiences largely shape behavior, rendering free will illusory. Erikson (1950/1993) incorporated developmental stages but maintained the centrality of unconscious dynamics. This framework underscores how freedom is constrained by hidden forces while also highlighting therapy's role in enhancing self-understanding and autonomy.



Behaviorism focuses on environmental determinants. Skinner (1953) contended that free will is the product of conditioning, with behavior shaped by reinforcement contingencies. From this view, autonomy is minimized, and behavior is predictable (Baum, 2017). Despite its deterministic stance, behaviorism yielded practical tools for behavioral modification.

Humanistic Theories arose in response, affirming autonomy, creativity, and self-actualization. Rogers (1961) stressed that individuals grow authentically when offered unconditional positive regard, while Maslow (1968) identified self-actualization as the peak of motivation. These frameworks emphasize intentional growth and self-directed development (Schunk et al., 2022).

Trait Theories recognize stable dispositions guiding behavior. Allport (1937) and McAdams (2021) described traits as structural consistencies that constrain behavior but also allow flexibility, enabling situational adaptation.

Cognitive And Social-Cognitive Theories integrate freedom and constraint. Bandura's reciprocal determinism (1989, 2001) highlighted dynamic interactions between cognition, behavior, and environment, while Rotter's (1966) locus of control emphasized beliefs about agency in shaping outcomes.

Existential Theories assert radical freedom. Frankl (1963) stressed meaning-making even under extreme constraints, while May (1981) argued that freedom and responsibility define human existence. Collectively, personality theories do not resolve the debate but show that determinism and freedom coexist, offering nuanced insights into the interplay of structure and agency.

4. Psychoanalytic Theory: Unconscious Determinism

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory represents one of the most influential deterministic frameworks in psychology. Freud (1923/1961) argued that human behavior is primarily shaped by unconscious motives, instinctual drives, and early childhood experiences. Within this model, the id, governed by the pleasure principle, seeks immediate gratification; the superego, embodying internalized moral standards, imposes prohibitions; and the ego mediates between these forces while navigating the constraints of reality. From this perspective, what appear to be conscious choices are often compromises between unconscious impulses and societal expectations, rather than genuine acts of autonomous decision-making (Eagle, 2011).

In Freud's view, free will is largely illusory. Phenomena such as dreams, slips of the tongue, and neurotic symptoms reveal the influence of unconscious processes on conscious experience, often without the individual's awareness (Freud, 1901/1960). For instance, a person might believe they "freely chose" a romantic partner, yet psychoanalytic theory would suggest that unresolved Oedipal conflicts or unconscious parental identifications subtly guided that decision. Thus, personality development and adult behavior are strongly influenced by psychosexual stages and defense mechanisms, leaving limited room for deliberate, conscious choice.

Neo-Freudian theorists introduced important modifications that softened Freud's strict determinism. Alfred Adler (1927/1956) emphasized the striving for superiority and the importance of social interest, proposing that individuals actively pursue goals rather than passively respond to instinctual drives. Carl Jung (1959/1968) introduced the concept of individuation, highlighting the integration of unconscious archetypes into a more cohesive and self-aware personality, thereby allowing greater self-direction. Similarly, Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages (1963) foregrounded the active role



individuals play in resolving developmental challenges throughout the lifespan. Despite these revisions, psychoanalytic approaches continue to emphasize internal determinism, portraying free will as constrained by unconscious factors. While Neo-Freudian perspectives introduce more agency than Freud's original model, the overarching theme remains that human behavior is deeply influenced—if not partially determined—by forces outside conscious awareness.

5. Behaviorist Perspectives: Environmental Determinism

While Freud emphasized unconscious forces, behaviorists identified environmental contingencies as the decisive factor in shaping personality. John B. Watson (1913) asserted that he could train any infant to become a doctor, lawyer, or thief by manipulating conditions, emphasizing external over internal influences. This radical empiricism positioned conditioning at the center of personality development and learning.

B. F. Skinner's (1971) radical behaviorism extended this logic, claiming that free will is illusory. Behavior, he argued, results from reinforcement histories and patterns of reward and punishment. What feels like choice is merely the expression of the strongest tendency produced by prior conditioning. For Skinner, concepts like freedom and dignity obscure the environmental determinants of human action. From this view, personality is a repertoire of learned responses to stimuli (Pervin & John, 2001). Conscientiousness, for example, reflects reinforced habits of punctuality, while maladaptive behaviors, such as phobias, are products of faulty conditioning, modifiable through interventions like systematic desensitization or operant conditioning. Later developments refined this deterministic stance. Albert Bandura (1986) critiqued classical behaviorism by introducing reciprocal determinism, where behavior, cognition, and environment influence one another dynamically. This framework recognizes agency by emphasizing self-regulation, forethought, and intentional action. For example, a student may be shaped by cultural expectations (environment) but also reflect on goals (cognition) and choose to study diligently (behavior). Bandura's concepts of self-efficacy and forethought highlight how individuals can anticipate outcomes and shape their actions (Zimmerman, 2000). Classical behaviorism exemplifies environmental determinism, reducing action to conditioned responses. Social-cognitive revisions, however, reintroduced human agency, situating behaviorism closer to a compatibilist view, where freedom and environmental influence interact in a dynamic interplay.

6. Humanistic Theories: Affirming Free Will

Humanistic psychology emerged in the mid-20th century as a reaction to the pessimism of psychoanalysis and the mechanistic determinism of behaviorism. Often described as the “third force” in psychology (Bugental, 1964), it emphasizes autonomy, creativity, growth, and human dignity. Central to this tradition is the belief that individuals possess free will and can shape their lives through conscious choice.

Carl Rogers (1961) advanced a person-centered theory that placed free will at the core of development. He argued that humans possess an innate actualizing tendency, a drive toward growth and fulfillment. Although environmental conditions such as parental acceptance or social norms can support or hinder this process, individuals remain capable of self-direction. Rogers (1959) further maintained that maladjustment arises not from unconscious conflict or conditioning but from incongruence between self-concept and lived experience. Therapy, therefore, seeks to restore congruence through unconditional positive regard, empathy, and authenticity, empowering clients to reconstruct the self through free will. Similarly, Abraham Maslow (1970) highlighted freedom in his



hierarchy of needs. Lower-level needs reflect biological and environmental determinants, but higher levels—love, esteem, and especially self-actualization—require conscious striving. Self-actualization involves creativity, autonomy, and authenticity. Maslow (1971) later extended this framework to self-transcendence, emphasizing choice beyond personal needs and the pursuit of meaning.

Humanistic psychology thus affirms personal agency. While acknowledging constraints, it argues that individuals are not fully determined by them. Freedom resides in interpreting circumstances, making choices, and acting authentically. This resonates with existentialist thought, particularly Frankl's (1959/2006) claim that even under extreme conditions, individuals retain the freedom to choose their attitude. Humanistic perspectives therefore conceptualize personality as a dynamic, evolving structure shaped by conscious choice and authentic self-construction (Deci & Ryan, 2000), offering psychology's strongest defense of free will.

7. Trait Theories: Between Structure and Agency

While psychoanalytic and behaviorist frameworks lean toward determinism and humanistic psychology champions free will, trait theories occupy an intermediate position. They identify consistent patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior across contexts. Traits suggest predictability and structural influence, yet individuals still exercise choice within dispositional boundaries.

Gordon Allport (1937) distinguished between common traits, shared across cultures, and personal dispositions, reflecting individuality. He emphasized that traits provide structure and consistency but cannot reduce personality to deterministic mechanisms. Instead, individuals are motivated by the *proprium*, or self, encompassing conscious striving and purposeful behavior. This balance shows traits guide tendencies, but people can intentionally redirect their lives.

Raymond Cattell (1957), through factor analysis, identified 16 primary personality factors as building blocks of personality. While acknowledging biological and environmental determinism, he recognized dynamic traits, such as attitudes and sentiments, reflecting goals and motivations. Hans Eysenck's (1967) biologically grounded theory emphasized extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism, highlighting heritable influence. Though biologically constrained, Eysenck acknowledged that learning and environment provide conditional autonomy.

The Five-Factor Model (FFM), or Big Five, conceptualizes personality through openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 1999). Research shows these traits are stable and heritable (Jang et al., 1996), suggesting determinism. Yet personality is not fixed; longitudinal studies reveal that individuals can cultivate traits such as conscientiousness or emotional stability through practice, reflection, and interventions (Roberts et al., 2017). For instance, someone high in neuroticism may use cognitive-behavioral strategies to manage anxiety, exercising free will within constraints.

Trait theories thus adopt a compatibilist stance. They acknowledge structural constraints while affirming intentional self-modification. Traits set the stage for behavior, but individuals retain agency in expression and regulation, highlighting the interplay of determinism and freedom.

8. Cognitive and Social-Cognitive Theories: Conditional Freedom: The rise of cognitive psychology in the mid-20th century offered a balanced perspective on the free will–determinism debate by emphasizing mental processes in shaping behavior. Cognitive and social-cognitive theories



propose that although human actions are influenced by biological and environmental determinants, individuals also exercise reflection, planning, and intentional agency.

Albert Bandura's social-cognitive theory was central to this shift. He introduced reciprocal determinism, the continuous interaction of cognition, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1986). Unlike Skinner's behaviorism, which depicted humans as passive products of reinforcement, Bandura emphasized agency, defining it as "the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation, and action" (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). Through mechanisms such as self-efficacy, individuals anticipate outcomes and persist despite setbacks, illustrating intentional choice within constraints.

George Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory similarly stressed human freedom. He viewed people as "scientists" constructing systems of meaning. Though shaped by experience, constructs remain flexible, allowing reinterpretation. Freedom lies in the capacity to reconstrue events and adopt new perspectives. For example, setbacks reframed as growth opportunities illustrate agency in meaning-making.

Julian Rotter's (1954) locus of control further highlights the interplay of determinism and freedom. Individuals with an internal locus perceive outcomes as contingent on their actions, while those with an external locus attribute them to fate, luck, or powerful others. Empirical studies show internal control correlates with achievement, adaptability, and better health (Lefcourt, 2014). Taken together, these perspectives advance a compatibilist view. While acknowledging that people are shaped by determinants, they emphasize conscious awareness, reflection, and self-regulation. Personality, therefore, is co-constructed through cognition, beliefs, and deliberate choice, underscoring the nuanced interplay of determinism and freedom in human development.

9. Existential Perspectives: Radical Freedom

Existential theories of personality align most closely with the philosophical defense of free will. Inspired by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, existential psychologists argue that humans are fundamentally free and responsible for shaping their lives, even when facing mortality, suffering, and limitation (May, 1983). Rollo May (1969) emphasized existential freedom as the capacity to choose authentically despite the "givens" of existence—death, isolation, and meaninglessness. Though external conditions may restrict opportunities, individuals remain free to select attitudes, values, and ways of being. Viktor Frankl (1959/2006), drawing on experiences in Nazi concentration camps, declared that the final human freedom is "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." His logotherapy underscores that meaning can always be found through choice, even in suffering, affirming the irreducible quality of freedom.

From this viewpoint, personality is not a fixed structure determined by unconscious drives, traits, or environment but a project of becoming, continuously shaped by choices that define identity. Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1943/1993) reflects this notion, emphasizing that humans construct themselves through decision-making. Anxiety, in this context, is not only pathological but also a by-product of freedom, signaling the responsibility that accompanies genuine choice.

Existential theories thus provide psychology's strongest affirmation of free will. While acknowledging constraints, they insist that freedom is central to human dignity and selfhood. Personality is therefore understood less as prediction or determinism and more as the lived experience of making choices that shape meaning, values, and identity.



10. Integrative Reflections

Applying personality theories to the free will–determinism debate reveals a continuum rather than a single answer.

Deterministic theories such as psychoanalysis and behaviorism emphasize forces that constrain choice. Freud's (1923/1961) focus on unconscious drives and Skinner's (1953) emphasis on environmental contingencies exemplify how behavior can be predicted without invoking autonomy.

Free Will–Affirming Theories highlight the individual's capacity to transcend determinants. Humanistic and existential perspectives stress autonomy, growth, and meaning-making. Rogers (1961) and Maslow (1968) underscored self-actualization, while Frankl (1959/2006) and May (1969) emphasized freedom and responsibility even under external limits.

Compatibilist perspectives offer middle ground. Trait theories (McCrae & Costa, 1999) recognize stable dispositions yet allow conditional adaptability, while cognitive-social models such as Bandura's (1986) reciprocal determinism and Rotter's (1966) locus of control illustrate how agency operates within constraints. These approaches affirm that people interpret experiences, exercise intentionality, and act deliberately despite limitations. This diversity shows that free will and determinism are best understood as a dynamic tension. Genetic predispositions may shape temperament, yet individuals consciously channel traits through practice, supportive environments, and meaning-making. Likewise, cognitive frameworks enable reinterpretation of past experiences, self-regulation, and value-driven goals. Personality psychology presents a spectrum of human potential, recognizing both determinants and freedom. By integrating insights across traditions, it offers a richer understanding of how individuals navigate the interplay of structure and autonomy, determinism and choice, preserving both explanatory power and human dignity.

11. Implications for Responsibility, Therapy, and Society: The free will–determinism debate carries profound implications that extend beyond theoretical discourse.

1. **Moral and legal responsibility:** If determinism were absolute, traditional notions of blame, praise, and punishment would require reconsideration. Yet, social institutions rely on the presumption of human agency to maintain accountability and justice (Morse, 2004).
2. **Therapy and psychological intervention:** Deterministic frameworks, such as psychoanalytic and behavioral approaches, emphasize uncovering underlying causes and reshaping behavior. In contrast, humanistic, cognitive, and existential therapies highlight client choice, personal responsibility, and the potential for growth and self-directed change (Corey, 2017).
3. **Education and development:** Beliefs about free will influence how educators motivate and guide learners. Strategies that cultivate self-efficacy and an internal locus of control are associated with higher engagement, persistence, and achievement (Zimmerman, 2000).
4. **Personal meaning and existential perspective:** Recognizing free will enables individuals to cultivate purpose, agency, and empowerment, while acknowledging determinative influences fosters humility, empathy, and a compassionate understanding of human behavior.

These applications illustrate that understanding the interplay of freedom and determinism is essential not only for psychological theory but also for practical domains that shape human lives.

12. Conclusion

The question of whether humans truly control their lives defies simple answers. Personality theories provide a continuum of perspectives: Freud's (1923/1961) focus on unconscious determinism and Skinner's (1953) environmental conditioning contrast sharply with Rogers's (1961) emphasis on self-



actualization and Frankl's (1959/2006) assertion of radical freedom. Cognitive, trait, and social-cognitive frameworks offer nuanced compatibilist models, recognizing that while determinants influence behavior, individuals retain meaningful freedom to act, reflect, and choose. Personality psychology, therefore, suggests both/and rather than an either/or understanding: humans are simultaneously shaped by biology, environment, and unconscious processes, yet they are also reflective, intentional, and capable of transformation. This integrative view preserves the dignity of human agency while acknowledging the powerful forces that shape behavior. In striking this balance, we gain a richer and more realistic appreciation of human personality—one that embraces responsibility, personal growth, and compassionate understanding of the constraints and freedoms inherent in human life.

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