

VARC Daily Practice Problem

Free Will vs Determinism · CAT Level

CAT Level · VARC

4 RC + 4 VA Questions

Recommended: 35 min

Marking: +3 / -1

READING COMPREHENSION PASSAGE

Para 1: The debate between free will and determinism sits at the intersection of philosophy, neuroscience, and everyday moral life. Determinists argue that every event in the universe, including every human thought and action, is the inevitable consequence of prior causes stretching back to the beginning of time. On this view, when a person 'decides' to act, the decision is not truly free — it is the product of brain states shaped by genetics, upbringing, environment, and a long chain of causation over which the individual had no ultimate control. Hard determinism, therefore, maintains that moral responsibility is a kind of collective illusion: we punish criminals and praise heroes, but if their acts were never truly 'up to them,' such responses rest on a philosophical error.

Para 2: Compatibilists, by contrast, argue that this framing creates a false dilemma. Freedom, they suggest, need not mean freedom from causation — it need only mean freedom from certain kinds of compulsion. A person acts freely when her action flows from her own desires, values, and deliberative processes, even if those desires were themselves caused by antecedent events. The compulsion that undermines freedom is not causal history but coercion, addiction, or mental illness. On the compatibilist account, then, moral responsibility survives determinism intact, because what matters is not whether causes existed but what kind of causes were operative.

Para 3: Hard incompatibilists, including libertarians about free will (not to be confused with the political variety), reject both positions. Libertarians maintain that genuine free will requires the ability to have done otherwise in exactly the same circumstances — a condition that determinism cannot satisfy. Rather than abandoning free will, they argue that the universe is not fully deterministic. Quantum indeterminacy introduces genuine openness into physical processes, potentially creating causal gaps that human agency might occupy. Critics note that randomness is no better a foundation for moral responsibility than determinism: if my choice is the product of a random quantum event, it is no more 'mine' than if it had been mechanically caused.

Para 4: Recent neuroscientific experiments, most famously those associated with Benjamin Libet, appear to complicate the intuitive picture further. Libet's studies suggested that a neural signal predicting a voluntary movement arises several hundred milliseconds before a subject reports becoming consciously aware of an intention to move. Some read this as evidence that conscious will is epiphenomenal — a story the brain tells itself after the real causal work has already been done. Yet the

interpretation of Libet's results remains deeply contested. Others argue that the experiments measure something far more primitive than the deliberate, reason-responsive agency philosophers mean by free will, and that genuine choices operate on entirely different timescales than the wrist-flicks Libet studied.

Para 5: What is at stake in this debate is not merely academic. If hard determinism is correct, our entire framework of punishment, praise, guilt, and regret may need radical revision. Some philosophers, like Derk Pereboom, argue that we should abandon retributive punishment while preserving forward-looking practices like rehabilitation and incapacitation. Others, like P.F. Strawson, contend that the reactive attitudes — resentment, gratitude, indignation — are so deeply embedded in human life that no philosophical argument could, or should, dislodge them. The question, then, is not only metaphysical but deeply human: it asks what kind of creatures we take ourselves to be.

RC QUESTIONS (Q1-Q4) · MCQ · +3 correct / -1 wrong

Q1

MAIN IDEA

The primary purpose of the passage is to

- (A) argue that compatibilism offers the most defensible account of human freedom
- (B) survey the principal positions in the free will debate and examine what is at stake in resolving it
- (C) demonstrate that neuroscientific evidence has decisively undermined the case for free will
- (D) establish that retributive punishment cannot be justified regardless of one's position on free will

Q2

INFERENCE — WEAKEN

Which of the following, if true, would most weaken the libertarian free will position as described in the passage?

- (A) Neuroscientists find that conscious deliberation occurs well before neural signals for movement arise
- (B) Quantum indeterminacy is shown to have no measurable effect on macro-level neural processes in the brain
- (C) Research reveals that compatibilist accounts of freedom are incoherent under closer logical scrutiny
- (D) Philosophers demonstrate that retributive punishment is unjustifiable even if agents are morally responsible

Q3

AUTHOR'S TONE / ATTITUDE

The author's attitude towards the Libet experiments and their implications can best be described as

- (A) dismissive — the experiments are treated as methodologically flawed and philosophically irrelevant
- (B) credulous — the author accepts Libet's findings as strong evidence against the existence of free will
- (C) measured — the author acknowledges the experiments complicate intuitions but notes their interpretation is contested
- (D) polemical — the author uses Libet's work to attack the compatibilist position specifically

Q4

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

In the context of the passage, "epiphenomenal" (paragraph 4) most nearly means

- (A) causally effective — conscious will actively produces the movements it seems to initiate
- (B) a secondary by-product — conscious will accompanies but does not cause the actions attributed to it
- (C) phenomenologically vivid — consciousness produces a rich subjective experience of agency
- (D) neurologically measurable — conscious will can be tracked and timed using brain-imaging techniques

VERBAL ABILITY QUESTIONS (Q5–Q8)

Q5

PARA JUMBLE

TITA · No -ve
marking

The four sentences below, when arranged logically, form a coherent paragraph. Write the correct order.

- P. Yet this inference is too quick: a random event is not the same as a free choice, and freedom surely requires that an action be attributable to the agent's reasons, not to chance.
- Q. The discovery of quantum indeterminacy seemed, to some philosophers, to offer an escape from the iron grip of causal determinism.
- R. What the libertarian needs, therefore, is not mere indeterminism but agent causation — a sui generis power of persons to initiate causal chains that is not itself reducible to prior physical events.
- S. If the physical world contains genuine causal gaps, they reasoned, perhaps human agency could occupy those gaps and introduce truly undetermined choices.

Your answer: _ _ _ _

Q6

ODD SENTENCE OUT

TITA · No -ve
marking

Five sentences form a paragraph. Identify the sentence number that does NOT belong.

- 1. Compatibilists argue that freedom is not the absence of causation but the presence of the right kind of causes — namely, one's own desires and rational deliberation.
- 2. Coercion, addiction, and compulsion undermine freedom not because they cause behaviour, but because they bypass or subvert the agent's rational agency.
- 3. The history of political liberalism has long been preoccupied with protecting individuals from state coercion and arbitrary interference.
- 4. On this view, a person who acts from her own considered values is free, even though those values were themselves shaped by upbringing and circumstance.
- 5. Compatibilism thus reconciles the scientific picture of a causally closed universe with our ordinary practices of holding one another responsible.

Your answer (sentence number): _

Q7

PARA SUMMARY · MCQ · -1 wrong

Choose the option that best summarises the following paragraph.

P.F. Strawson's influential essay "Freedom and Resentment" argued that whether determinism is true is largely irrelevant to our practices of holding each other responsible. What matters, Strawson claimed, are the "reactive attitudes" — emotions like gratitude, resentment, and indignation — which are constitutive of human relationships. These attitudes cannot be suspended on philosophical grounds, because to do so would be to step outside the very form of life that gives our concepts of responsibility their meaning. The philosophical demand that we give up blame and praise because of determinism misunderstands the role these practices play in the fabric of human life.

- (A) Strawson argues that determinism is false and that our reactive attitudes prove the existence of free will
- (B) Strawson holds that our practices of holding each other responsible are grounded in reactive attitudes so fundamental to human life that the truth of determinism cannot dislodge them
- (C) Strawson believes that gratitude and resentment are irrational emotions that philosophy should help us overcome through careful reasoning
- (D) Strawson suggests that because determinism may be true, we should reform our practices of blame and punishment to reflect this philosophical reality

Q8

PARA JUMBLE

**TITA - No -ve
marking**

Arrange sentences P, Q, R, S into a coherent paragraph. Write the correct order.

- P.** This "manipulation argument" claims that if we would not hold someone responsible for actions caused by a neuroscientist directly manipulating her brain, we should not hold her responsible for actions caused by genes and upbringing either.
- Q.** Compatibilists have responded by drawing a distinction between the history of a person's character formation and the character itself: what matters for responsibility is who you are now, not how you came to be that way.
- R.** One of the most powerful objections to compatibilism takes the form of a thought experiment involving a person whose entire character has been engineered by another agent from birth.
- S.** Critics find this response unsatisfying, arguing that if the character itself is the product of manipulation, it cannot be the basis for genuine responsibility.

Your answer: _ _ _ _