



# Ball State Philosophy Outreach Project Lesson Plan

## Topic: Free Will vs. Determinism

Time: 50-60 minutes

**Opening Questions (15-20 minutes):** These questions should be asked to grab students' attention and for the facilitator or teacher to gauge the students' opinions and prior knowledge. As the facilitator, ask the questions to the group and be ready for any answer. Allow as many students as possible to voice their opinion.

What is fate? Do you believe fate plays a role in the events in your life? If so, can you change your fate? Is it escapable?

What is free will? What makes a choice a free one? Do you think you have it?

**Key Terms:** These are terms that might come up during the conversation. If so the facilitator can tell a student that they have happened across a key philosophical concept.

- *free will*: the act of doing one thing when you could have done something else  
Example: You wake up and freely choose to eat Coco Puffs instead of Cap'n Crunch.
- *agent causation*: actions of individuals based on thoughts can cause reactions
- *hard determinism*: events are caused by past events, nothing other than what actually happens could have happened (fate is set in stone, you can't do anything else)
- *reductionism*: all parts of our own experience can be traced back down the chain of cause and effect. You can't help but feel and react the way you're reacting and feeling.
- *responsibility*: deeming someone's actions morally wrong
- *accountability*: holding someone responsible  
Example: You hold someone accountable for murder by putting them in jail.

### Key Thinkers:

Harry Frankfurt:

- Believed people can be held responsible for actions that aren't "free."  
Example: You like philosophy club and come to philosophy club every week, but this week your history teacher says "everyone has to go to philosophy club," so you do. Can you be held responsible for this decision? Technically, you were forced to go, but you would have gone anyways, so shouldn't you be responsible for that action? Frankfurt says yes.

Patricia Churchland:

- believed we should place emphasis on level of control when assigning responsibility
- can't blame someone for sneezing, but you could blame them for sneezing on you because they have control over where they sneeze

Paul Henry Thiry D'Holbach:

- believed that every action is a result of an unbroken chain of events outside of the person's control

### **Discussion Question:**

So which is true? Do we have free will or is everything determined?

### **Activity (20-25 minutes):**

Students divide themselves into two groups based on beliefs. The students who believe in free will will be in the free will group, and the students who believe in determinism will be in the determinism group. If students all join the same team then the facilitator may break the students up. Then ask students to share their reasoning within each group.

*Ask free will group:*

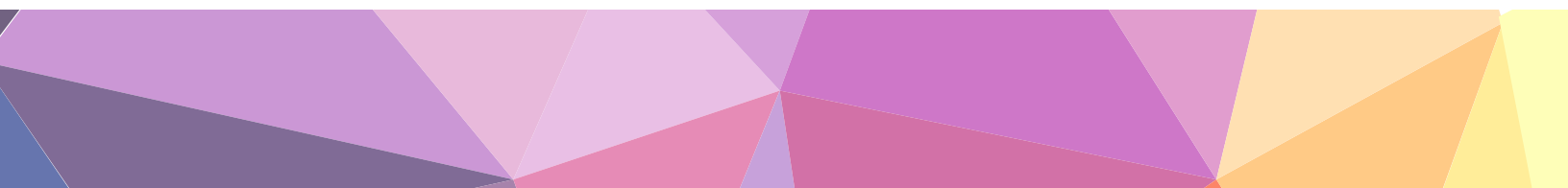
- Where do the thoughts and desires that lead people to act come from? Are they random
- What makes someone want to do one thing vs. something else? If they are caused... doesn't that mean their decisions aren't entirely free and that they are determined?
- Does feeling free mean we are? What makes us more special than physical causes and effects?

*Ask determinists:*

- Say the chemical functions of your brain cause you to feel sad, so you act on that sadness by staying in your room all day and isolating yourself. Seems deterministic (your action of isolation can be traced back to chemical brain properties). But what makes one person hide in their room when they are sad and another person eat their favorite food or hang out with friends? It seems that individual causes could have multiple outcomes. Under a deterministic model, how are these outcomes differentiated?
- What about when we flip a coin or roll a die to make "random" decisions? (even the options we choose, who flips it, etc. are determined)

Throughout discussion, encourage students to switch groups if they change their minds. This could mean leaving their group and going to sit with the other group.

At the end, regroup for a final discussion.



## Final Discussion Questions (15-20min):

Ask students who chose to switch sides why they moved. Ask the students that stayed their reasoning behind staying on their initially chosen side.

### *Ethical implications:*

Our society relies heavily on holding people responsible. What does determinism mean for responsibility? How can we defend the need for accountability? Can we still hold people accountable under determinism? Can anyone be held morally responsible or accountable if their actions are determined? Would accepting determinism mean you could not condemn someone for doing anything?

Should we hold people who are determined by internal factors responsible/accountable?

- People make poor decisions based on alcohol. Since their actions were determined by alcohol, can they be held responsible?
- People make poor decisions based on prescribed medication. Since their actions were determined by medication, can they be held responsible?
- People make poor decisions based on emotions. Since their actions were determined by emotion, can they be held responsible?

### *Religious Implications:*

Does believing in free will take away the power of any religious figures? Does religion impact your stance on determinism vs. free will? If there is a God, is God's role to evaluate individuals on choices made with free will, or is God's role to act as the determining factor of the universe? Can an atheist be a determinist? How?

