Free Will and Determinism: An Introduction



Framing question: Are our choices genuinely up to us, or shaped by causes beyond our control?

Why it matters: moral responsibility, praise and blame, punishment, identity, daily decisions

Three headline positions: hard determinism, libertarian free will, compatibilism

Course roadmap: concepts, history, arguments, scientific challenges, practical responses

Beginner approach: define terms, separate intuitions from arguments, avoid false dichotomies

Core Concepts: Causation, Determinism, and Freedom

- Causal determinism: prior events plus natural laws fix every event
- Determinism is not fatalism: what we do still matters
- Types: physical, psychological, theological, and logical determinism
- Free will requires choice, control, and alternative possibilities
- Two freedom families: doing otherwise vs. acting from one's own desires
- Don't confuse determinism with indeterminism, predestination, or predictability

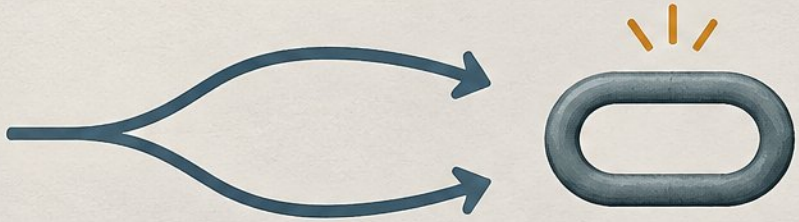
Causal Determinism

Past events necessitate future events



Fatalism

A fixed outcome regardless of action





The Classical Roots of the Debate

- Ancient Greeks: fate, necessity, and early responsibility debates (Aristotle, Epicureans, Stoics)
- Stoics: everything is causally determined, yet actions are 'up to us' when they come through us
- Augustine and Boethius: reconciling divine foreknowledge with human freedom
- Hobbes and Hume: liberty as the absence of external impediments
- Kant: reconciling natural causality with transcendental freedom
- A timeline helps learners see that today's positions have deep roots





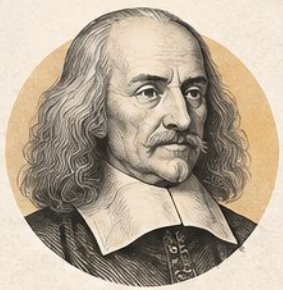
Ancient Greeks

Fate, necessity, and early responsibility debates (Aristotle, Epicureans, Stoics)



Augustine

Reconciling divine foreknowledge with human freedom



Hobbes

Liberty as the absence of external impediments



Hume

Liberty as the absence of external impediments



Kant

Reconciling natural causality with transcendental freedom

Hard Determinism: No Freedom, No Responsibility?



- - Thesis: determinism is true and rules out free will and moral responsibility
- - Universal causation: no genuine alternative possibilities
- - Basic desert blame and retributive punishment lose justification
- - Key voices: d’Holbach, Spinoza, and Pereboom’s hard incompatibilism
- - The felt sense of deliberation and agency is the main objection
- - Hard determinists still explain causes, reasons, and reform

Libertarian Free Will: Could We Have Done Otherwise?

- **Thesis:** free will exists and is incompatible with determinism
- **PAP:** a free agent could have done otherwise in the same situation
- **Three families:** noncausal, event-causal, and agent-causal theories
- **Agent causation:** the agent is an uncaused originator of her decisions
- **Quantum indeterminism** adds chance — does that help freedom or just luck?
- **Luck objection:** if undetermined, what makes the choice genuinely up to the agent?





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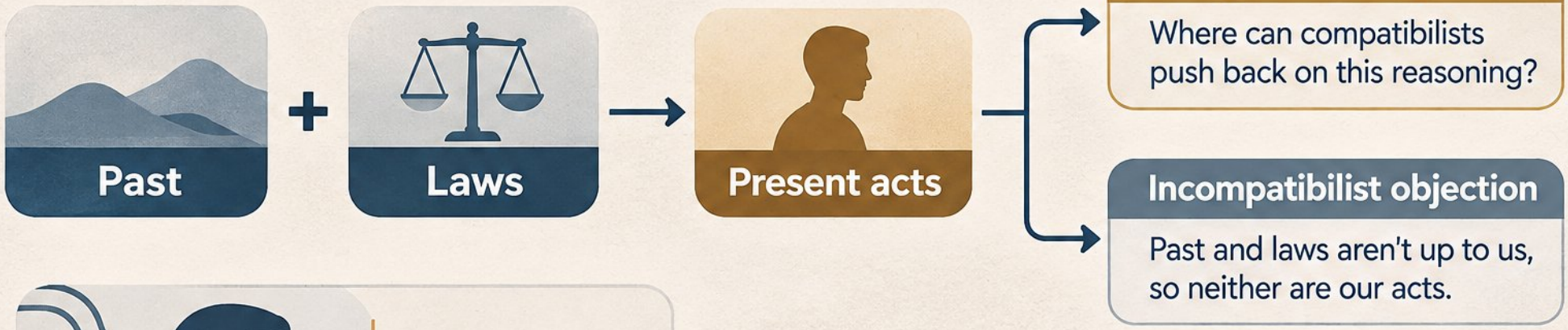
Compatibilism: Freedom Within a Determined World

- Core move: determinism and free will can both be true
- Classical view (Hobbes, Hume): freedom = acting on one's own desires, without coercion
- Frankfurt cases: alternaitive possibilities may not be needed for moral responsibility
- Strawson: responsibility rests on reactive attitudes—resentment, gratitude, indignation
- Objections: the arbitrary will, manipulation, moral luck
- Leading challenge: the consequence argument



The Consequence Argument and Manipulation Arguments

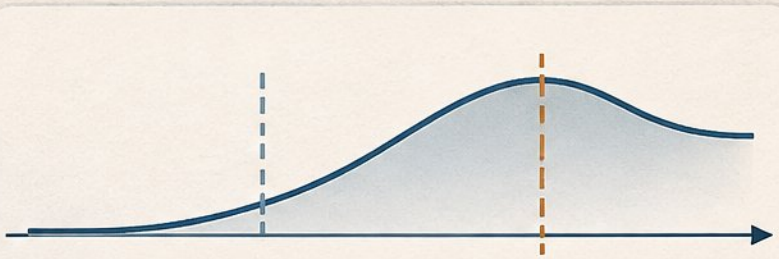
- Consequence argument: past and laws aren't up to us, so neither are our acts
- Where can compatibilists push back on this reasoning?
- Manipulation argument: a designed agent seems unfree—are we relevantly different?
- Pereboom's four-case argument; Mele's zygote argument (Diana and Ernie)
- Compatibilist replies: soft-line (find a relevant difference) vs. hard-line (deny it)

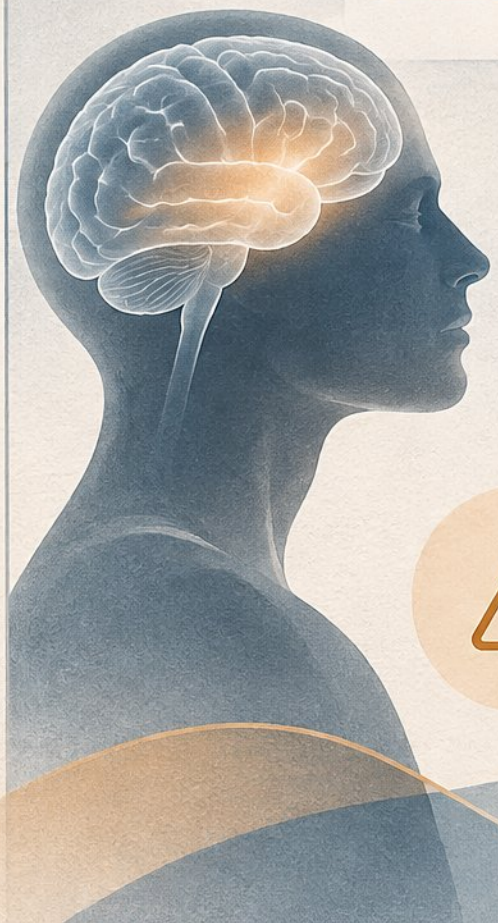


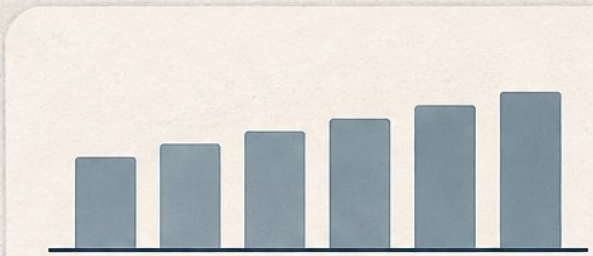


Science and the Will: What Neuroscience Suggests

- Libet-style experiments: readiness potential appears before reported awareness of intention
- But the evidence is fragile: a meta-analysis found only six studies on the key time gap
- 2025–2026 work links the readiness potential to stochastic accumulation and metacognitive access
- Important vs, arbitrary choices: readiness potential appears for trivial picks, not meaningful ones
- Careful reading: correlation is not causation; avoid sensational headlines









Correlation is not causation; avoid sensational headlines

Psychology, Situationism, and Automaticity



- Dual-process findings: much behavior is automatic, not deliberative
- Situationism: small contextual factors strongly shape behavior
- Agency may be predictive and inferential, not directly given
- 2026 survey: only 17.5% of neuroscientists reject free will
- Do findings undermine freedom, or only naive conscious control?







Practical Stakes: Responsibility, Punishment, and Everyday Life



- **Basic desert:** blame and praise deserved just because of the act
- **Forward-looking responsibility:** deterrence, rehabilitation, and public safety
- **Moral luck:** much of what we do traces to factors beyond control
- **Personal agency:** goal-setting, habit change, and self-forgiveness remain possible
- **Strawson's reactive attitudes:** responsibility as interpersonal, compatible with determinism
- **Organizations:** accountability systems can reward reform without demanding desert

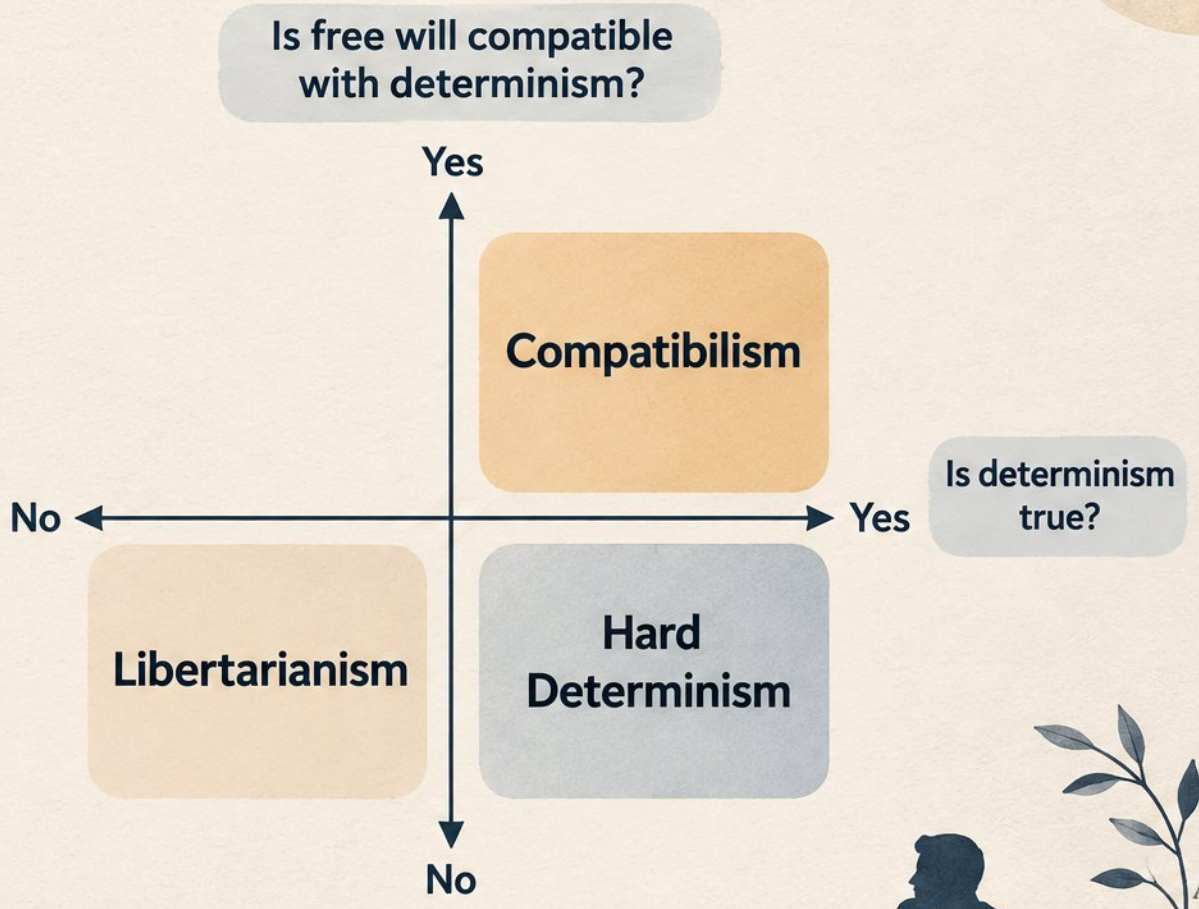
Case Workshop: Analyzing Real-World Responsibility Cases



- Case 1 — Young offender: how do hard determinists, libertarians, compatibilists respond?
- Case 2 — Workplace accountability: when does praise or blame make sense?
- Case 3 — Habit change: what does 'taking responsibility' actually mean here?
- Small groups analyze each case through the three lenses; a facilitator keeps focus
- Debrief: do positions disagree about facts, values, or definitions of freedom?
- Remember: basic desert (backward-looking) vs. forward-looking responsibility

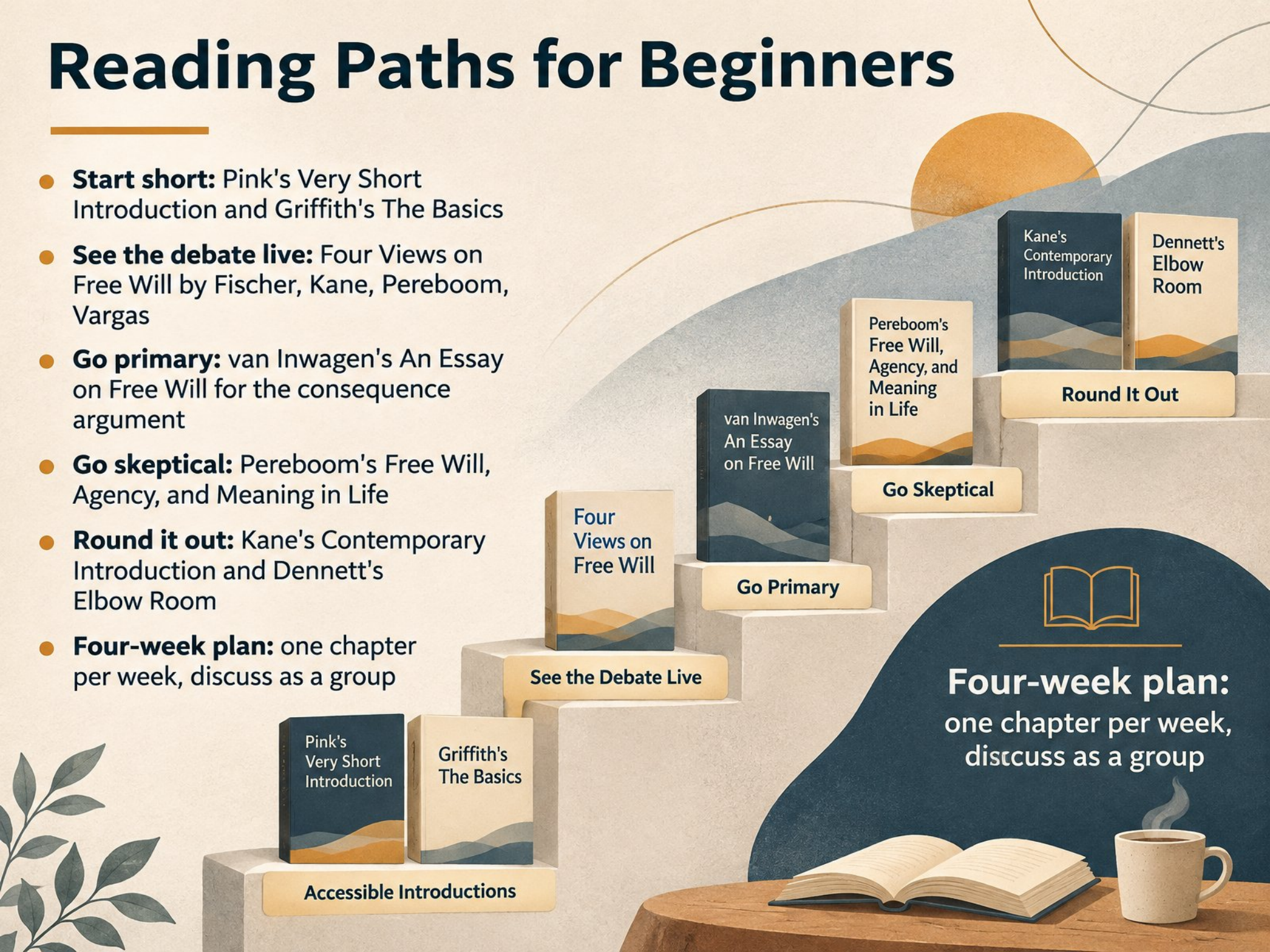
Discussion Lab: Forming Your Own View

- Structured debate: hard determinism vs. libertarianism vs. compatibilism
- Self-check quiz: match everyday scenarios to the best-fit position
- Watch out: don't conflate determinism with fatalism, or science with denial of freedom
- Two-axis map: Is determinism true? Is free will compatible with it?
- Reflect: What assumptions about control and responsibility do you bring?
- Book-club tip: state your view and ask what would change your mind



Reading Paths for Beginners

- **Start short:** Pink's Very Short Introduction and Griffith's The Basics
- **See the debate live:** Four Views on Free Will by Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, Vargas
- **Go primary:** van Inwagen's An Essay on Free Will for the consequence argument
- **Go skeptical:** Pereboom's Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life
- **Round it out:** Kane's Contemporary Introduction and Dennett's Elbow Room
- **Four-week plan:** one chapter per week, discuss as a group



Wrap-Up: Next Steps and Continuing Study



- Free will remains a live philosophical problem, not a settled science verdict
- Compare your position today with your view at the course start
- Continue with Stanford Encyclopedia entries on free will and responsibility
- Run your own book club: sample schedule, questions, facilitation tips
- Carry forward open questions: animal agency, AI agents, neuroscience
- Final reflection: what evidence or argument would change your mind?

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