

Being human

International Baccalaureate · IB Diploma · Philosophy · SL

IB Diploma Programme Philosophy SL (the guide first assessed in 2024). This topic covers the **core theme** , *being human*, which every SL and HL student studies. It is examined in Section A of Paper 1, where you answer one question on a **stimulus** (a short text or an image) by finding a philosophical issue in it and discussing it. Paper 1 lasts 1 hour 45 minutes at SL (50%) and 2 hours 30 minutes at HL (40%); the rest of the paper is essays on the optional themes (topic 02). The core theme's ideas (identity, personhood, freedom, mind) appear in every other part of the course.

In September 1848 an explosion drove an iron rod through the head of Phineas Gage, a railway worker in Vermont. Amazingly, he survived and could walk and talk. But his doctor reported that his friends said he was “no longer Gage”: the polite, careful worker had become rude and unreliable. Was he still the same person? If his character changed because his brain changed, is a person just a brain? Could he be blamed for his new behaviour? These are the questions of *being human*.

Must-know for the core theme:

Area	Key content
arguments	premises and conclusion; valid and sound; deduction and induction; fallacies; thought experiments
identity	what makes you the same person over time: body, memory, psychological continuity
personhood	what makes a being a person; who is included
freedom	hard determinism, libertarianism, compatibilism; moral responsibility
mind	dualism and physicalism; the knowledge argument
Paper 1 Section A	find the issue in the stimulus; argue; answer objections; conclude

Arguments: the philosopher's tool

Philosophy works by **argument** : reasons, called **premises** , that support a **conclusion** .

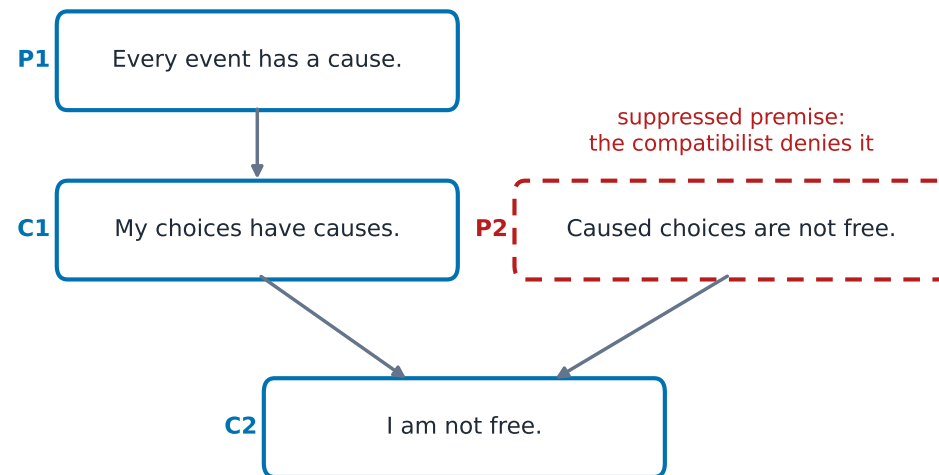
- An argument is **valid** if the conclusion must be true *when* the premises are true. Validity is about form only.
- An argument is **sound** if it is valid *and* its premises are actually true.
- **Deductive** arguments aim at certainty; **inductive** arguments move from many cases to a probable conclusion.

Common **fallacies** (errors in reasoning):

Fallacy	What it does	Example
begging the question	assumes the conclusion in a premise	“God exists because the Bible says so, and the Bible is true because it is God’s word.”
straw man	attacks a weaker version of the other view	“Determinists say we are robots, but we are not robots.”
false dilemma	offers only two options when there are more	“Either we have total free will or none at all.”
appeal to authority	uses a famous name instead of a reason	“Einstein believed it, so it must be true.”

Philosophers also use **thought experiments** : imagined cases that test a concept. Read each one twice: once for what it shows, and once for what it assumes.

Worked example. ”Every event has a cause. My choices are events. So I am not free.“ The argument needs a hidden premise: ”caused choices are not free“. That premise is exactly what compatibilists deny, so the argument does not prove its conclusion against them.



The inference to 'not free' needs a hidden premise, and that premise is what is in dispute

Personal identity

Personal identity asks what makes you the same person as the child in your old photographs.

Theory	Answer	Problem case
body theory	the same living body	the ship of Theseus: replace every plank over time; is it the same ship?
memory theory (John Locke)	the same memories and consciousness	Thomas Reid’s brave officer: the old general remembers being the young officer, who remembers being a boy, but the general has forgotten the boy
psychological continuity (Derek Parfit)	overlapping chains of memories, beliefs and character	a teleporter that makes two copies of you: which one is you?

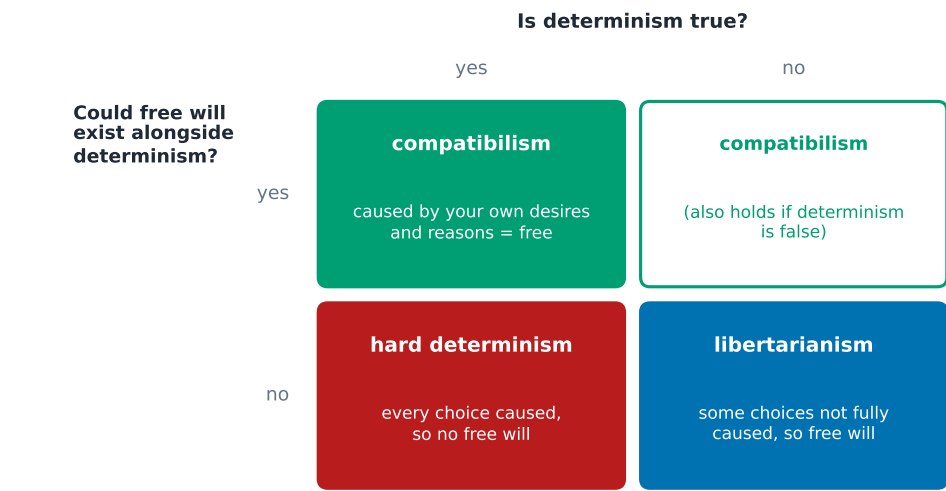
Reid’s case shows that memory alone fails: identity must carry over (if A = B and B = C, then A = C), but memory does not. Parfit answers that what matters is not strict identity but continuity, which can come in degrees, as Phineas Gage’s story suggests.

Personhood

Personhood is a moral idea, not a biological one. A **human** is a member of our species; a **person** is a being with certain abilities: consciousness, reason, self-awareness, communication, moral responsibility. The two groups may not match exactly. Some philosophers argue that great apes or future AI might be persons; others ask whether newborn babies or people in a coma meet the criteria. This is why personhood matters in debates on abortion, the end of life, animal rights and artificial intelligence.

Freedom

The **free will** problem: if every event has a cause, can any choice be free?



The three positions answer two different questions: is determinism true, and could free will exist if it were?

Position	Claim	Main problem
hard determinism	every choice is caused, so there is no free will and no real moral responsibility	punishment and praise seem unfair, yet we cannot stop using them
libertarianism	some choices are not fully caused; the agent starts them	an uncaused choice looks random, not controlled
compatibilism	a free act is one caused by your own desires and reasons, without force	if your desires were themselves caused (by genes, upbringing), are they really “yours”?

Harry Frankfurt’s “unwilling addict” helps the compatibilist: the addict takes the drug, but wishes he did not want it. He is unfree not because his act was caused, but because he acts on a desire he rejects. Freedom, on this view, means acting on desires you accept.

Mind and body

Dualism (associated with René Descartes) says the mind is different from the body: thoughts and feelings are not physical things. **Physicalism** says everything, including the mind, is physical: a thought is a brain process.

- The **knowledge argument** (Frank Jackson): Mary is a scientist who knows every physical fact about colour but has lived all her life in a black-and-white room. When she first sees red, does she learn something new? If yes, not all facts are physical.
- Phineas Gage supports physicalism: damage to the brain changed the person.

Answering a Section A question

1. Identify the **philosophical issue** in the stimulus and link it to the core theme (“the stimulus raises the question of whether ...”).
2. Explain two or three positions with named philosophers.
3. Evaluate: give the strongest objection to each and a reply.
4. Reach a clear conclusion that follows from your arguments.

Worked plan. *Stimulus: a news report about a person whose personality changed after a brain injury.*

- Issue: does personal identity depend on psychological continuity?
- Positions: the body theory (same person, same body); Parfit’s psychological continuity (identity weakens as character changes).
- Objections: the body theory ignores what we care about in a person; Parfit’s view makes identity vague.
- Conclusion: the case supports Parfit; the person is partly, not wholly, the same, and we should judge their new behaviour with care.

Checklist

- Arguments: premises and conclusion; valid and sound; deduction and induction; four fallacies; thought experiments; hidden premises.
- Identity: body, memory and psychological continuity theories with their problem cases (Theseus, Reid’s officer, the teleporter).
- Personhood: human versus person; why the idea matters ethically.
- Freedom: hard determinism, libertarianism, compatibilism, and Frankfurt’s unwilling addict.
- Mind: dualism, physicalism, Jackson’s knowledge argument.
- Section A: issue, positions, objections, conclusion.