

A-LEVEL PSYCHOLOGY REVISION NOTES

Approaches in Psychology

AQA Psychology 7181 (AS) and 7182 (A-level)

2025 specification · spec sections 3.2.1 (AS) and 4.2.1 (A-level)

Contents

1. **The Behaviourist Approach**
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How to use these notes. The first four approaches (behaviourist, SLT, cognitive, biological) apply to both AS and A-level. Sections marked **A-LEVEL** — the psychodynamic and humanistic approaches and the comparison section — are **not assessed at AS**. Key terms are in **bold**; each section ends with PEEL evaluation suitable for extended-writing questions.

Note on the 2025 specification: **Wundt and introspection** (origins of psychology), **"modelling" as a separate SLT term**, "influence of genes" (now redundant with genotype/phenotype), and "focus on the self" and "influence on counselling psychology" (from humanism) were **removed** in the 2025 spec. **Cognitive neuroscience** has moved inside the biological approach. "Theoretical and computer models" has been reworded to **"use of models"**.

AQA 2025 SPECIFICATION — APPROACHES IN PSYCHOLOGY CONTENT

- **Learning approaches:** (i) **behaviourist approach** — classical conditioning and Pavlov's research; operant conditioning, types of reinforcement and Skinner's research; (ii) **social learning theory** — imitation, identification, vicarious reinforcement, the role of mediational processes and Bandura's research.
- **The cognitive approach:** the study of internal mental processes; the role of schema; the use of models to explain and make inferences about mental processes.
- **The biological approach:** the genetic basis of behaviour — genotype, phenotype and evolution; influence of biological structures and neurochemistry on behaviour; cognitive neuroscience.
- **A-LEVEL The psychodynamic approach:** the role of the unconscious; the structure of personality (Id, Ego, Superego); defence mechanisms (repression, denial, displacement); psychosexual stages.
- **A-LEVEL Humanistic Psychology:** free will; self-actualisation and Maslow's hierarchy of needs; congruence; the role of conditions of worth.
- **A-LEVEL Comparison of approaches.**

1 The Behaviourist Approach

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

- All behaviour is **learned through experience** — we are born as a "blank slate" (tabula rasa).
- Only **observable behaviour** is the proper subject of scientific psychology — internal mental processes are unscientific.
- The same **laws of learning** apply to humans and other animals — so research on rats and dogs is informative for human behaviour.
- Behaviour is acquired through **classical conditioning** and **operant conditioning**.

Classical Conditioning (Pavlov 1927)

Classical conditioning is learning through **association**. A neutral stimulus is repeatedly paired with an unconditioned stimulus that already produces a reflex response, until the neutral stimulus alone produces the same response.

Stage	Stimulus	Response
Before conditioning	Food (UCS)	Salivation (UCR)
Before conditioning	Bell (NS)	No response
During conditioning	Bell + Food (NS + UCS) repeatedly paired	Salivation
After conditioning	Bell (CS)	Salivation (CR)

Pavlov's dogs (1927). Pavlov noticed dogs salivated to food. He paired food with a bell ringing. After repeated pairings, the bell alone caused salivation — the dogs had learned by association. Pavlov went on to identify other features of classical conditioning: **extinction** (the CR fades without further pairing), **spontaneous recovery**, **stimulus generalisation** (similar stimuli also produce the CR) and **discrimination**.

Operant Conditioning (Skinner 1953)

Operant conditioning is learning through **consequences**. Behaviour followed by pleasant consequences is more likely to be repeated; behaviour followed by unpleasant consequences is less likely.

Type	What it means	Effect on behaviour	Example
Positive reinforcement	Adding a pleasant stimulus after the behaviour.	Behaviour increases.	A child receives praise for tidying their room → tidies again.
Negative reinforcement	Removing an unpleasant stimulus after the behaviour.	Behaviour increases.	Taking painkillers removes a headache → take painkillers next time.
Positive punishment	Adding an unpleasant stimulus after the behaviour.	Behaviour decreases.	Touching a hot stove → burn → don't touch again.
Negative punishment	Removing a pleasant stimulus after the behaviour.	Behaviour decreases.	Phone confiscated after rude behaviour → less rude behaviour.

Skinner's box. Skinner placed a hungry rat in a controlled chamber with a lever. Pressing the lever delivered food (positive reinforcement); rats quickly learned to press the lever repeatedly. In another version, a constant electric current was switched off when the lever was pressed (negative reinforcement) — again, rats learned to press. Skinner also studied **schedules of reinforcement** (continuous vs partial; ratio vs interval) and found **variable-ratio** schedules produced the most persistent behaviour (the basis of gambling addiction).

Evaluation

Strength — scientific credibility (validity). A major strength of the behaviourist approach is its commitment to objective, controlled lab experiments. By using highly standardised settings — Skinner's box, Pavlov's apparatus — behaviourists could measure behaviour reliably and establish causal stimulus–response laws. This is important because it gave psychology genuine scientific status at a time when introspection-based methods were seen as subjective and unreliable. This therefore strengthens the validity of behaviourist findings and helped establish psychology as a science.

Strength — real-world applications (economy). A further strength is the applied success of behaviourist principles. Token economies in psychiatric hospitals and schools, systematic desensitisation for phobias (see Clinical Psychology Section 4), and parenting and education techniques all draw directly on operant and classical conditioning. This is important because applied success delivers measurable economic and social benefits (e.g. reduced healthcare costs, improved learning outcomes), and is itself indirect evidence that the underlying mechanisms are real. This strengthens the applied value of behaviourism.

Limitation — environmental reductionism. A significant limitation is that the approach is **environmentally reductionist**. It reduces complex human behaviour — friendship, language, depression — to chains of stimulus–response associations and ignores cognition, emotion and biology. This is important because reducing meaningful behaviour to conditioning loses the very features that distinguish it: a smile from a friend is not just a "conditioned response to facial movement". This limits behaviourism's ability to explain higher-order human behaviour and supports interactionist accounts that combine learning with cognition and biology.

Limitation — over-reliance on animal research (generalisability). A further limitation is the heavy reliance on animal subjects (Pavlov's dogs, Skinner's rats and pigeons). Behaviourists assumed the laws of learning are universal across species, but humans have language, culture and far more complex cognition than rats. This is important because findings from highly controlled animal studies may not transfer cleanly to human behaviour in real-world settings. This limits the external validity of behaviourist research and supports the need to test claims with human participants in natural contexts.

Limitation — environmental determinism. The approach is also strongly **deterministic** — Skinner explicitly denied free will and argued behaviour is fully controlled by reinforcement history. This is important because it conflicts with everyday experience of choice and with the legal system's assumption of moral responsibility. This raises issues-and-debates concerns and supports a soft-deterministic alternative in which reinforcement shapes — but does not fully determine — behaviour.

Limitation — ethical issues with animal research. A further limitation is the ethical concerns about Skinner's animal research — rats were starved to 80% of body weight to motivate lever-pressing, and given electric shocks. This is important because the BPS code and the 3Rs framework (Replacement, Reduction, Refinement) limit how such research could be conducted today. On a cost–benefit analysis the scientific gain was significant, but the costs to animal welfare were also real and would not be tolerated in modern research.

Conclusion. Behaviourism delivered genuine scientific credibility and effective applied interventions, and remains influential in education, clinical practice and animal training. Its core weaknesses — environmental reductionism, over-reliance on animal research and strong determinism — mean it is now usually combined with cognitive elements (cognitive-behavioural approaches) rather than used in its pure form.

2 Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1977)

Social Learning Theory (SLT), developed by **Albert Bandura**, bridges behaviourism and the cognitive approach. SLT accepts that learning occurs through classical and operant conditioning but adds that we also learn **indirectly** by observing others — and that **cognitive (mediational) processes** sit between observation and behaviour.

KEY TERMS (AQA)

Imitation — copying the behaviour of another person.

Identification — adopting the behaviours, attitudes and values of a role model with whom the observer feels similarity or admiration.

Vicarious reinforcement — learning by observing the consequences of another person's behaviour. If the model is rewarded, the observer is more likely to imitate. If the model is punished, the observer is less likely to imitate.

Mediational processes — the cognitive processes that occur between observing a behaviour and reproducing it: *attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation*.

The Four Mediational Processes

Process	Question it answers
Attention	Did the observer notice the behaviour? (More likely if the model is salient — attractive, high-status, similar to the observer.)
Retention	Can the observer remember the behaviour? (Verbal or visual memory representation.)
Motor reproduction	Can the observer physically reproduce the behaviour? (A toddler can imitate a wave but not a backflip.)
Motivation	Does the observer want to reproduce the behaviour? (Influenced by perceived rewards — vicarious reinforcement — and self-efficacy.)

Bandura's Bobo Doll Studies (1961, 1963)

Feature	Detail
Aim	To investigate whether children learn aggression by observing adults.
Procedure (1961)	72 children (36 boys, 36 girls) aged 3–6. Three conditions: (1) aggressive model attacking an inflatable Bobo doll, (2) non-aggressive model playing peacefully, (3) control with no model. Children were later observed playing with the Bobo doll.
Findings	Children who saw the aggressive model imitated specific aggressive behaviours (e.g. hitting the doll with a mallet). Boys imitated more physical aggression than girls; girls imitated more verbal aggression. Children were more likely to imitate same-sex models.
Procedure (1963) — vicarious reinforcement	Children watched a model attack Bobo and then receive either: (a) reward (praised, given sweets), (b) punishment (told off, smacked), or (c) no consequence. They were then allowed to play with Bobo.
Findings (1963)	Children who saw the model <i>rewarded</i> imitated most aggression. Children who saw the model <i>punished</i> imitated least — direct evidence of vicarious reinforcement .
Conclusion	Children learn behaviour through observation and imitation, mediated by attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation. The consequences observed for the model (vicarious reinforcement) influence whether the behaviour is reproduced.

Evaluation

Strength — research support from Bandura (1961, 1963). A major strength of SLT is direct experimental support from Bandura's Bobo doll studies. Children who observed an aggressive model imitated specific aggressive behaviours, and children who observed the model being rewarded imitated more than those who observed punishment. This is important because it directly demonstrates both imitation and vicarious reinforcement under controlled conditions, exactly as SLT predicts. This therefore strengthens the validity of SLT as a real psychological mechanism for learning.

Strength — explains cultural differences in behaviour. A further strength is that SLT can account for cultural and historical variation in behaviour, which pure behaviourism struggles with. Aggressive role models in violent media, peer groups and family environments differ across cultures, predicting the differences in aggression rates observed. This is important because it shows SLT can explain how individuals come to differ from one another based on different observational learning experiences. This strengthens the model's explanatory range.

Limitation — lacks ecological validity (Bobo doll critique). However, a significant limitation is the artificial nature of the Bobo doll studies. The Bobo doll is designed to be hit (it bounces back up), so "attacking" it may not reflect real aggression toward people. Cumberbatch (1990) found that children who had never seen a Bobo doll were five times more likely to imitate aggressive behaviour toward it. This is important because if children were responding to novelty rather than genuinely learning aggression, the findings may overstate SLT effects in real life. This limits the external validity of the supporting evidence.

Limitation — ignores biological factors. A further limitation is that SLT downplays biological influences on behaviour. Twin studies show substantial heritability for aggression and other traits — biological factors that SLT does not address. This is important because a full account of behaviour requires combining observational

learning with biology, particularly when explaining individual differences in how children respond to identical models. This supports an interactionist nature–nurture approach.

Strength — practical applications (media regulation, role modelling). A clear strength is SLT's applied value. Media-violence regulation, anti-bullying programmes that use positive peer role models, and the use of celebrity role models in public-health campaigns all draw on SLT. The use of pro-social models in television (e.g. Sesame Street) has demonstrably increased pro-social behaviour in children. This is important because applied success delivers measurable benefits and supports SLT's validity.

Limitation — soft determinism. SLT is less deterministic than pure behaviourism — mediational processes allow the observer to choose whether to imitate. This is generally a strength (more realistic than hard determinism) but can also be seen as a limitation, because if cognitive processes can override observed behaviour, the predictive precision of the theory is reduced. This is important for issues-and-debates: SLT sits in the soft-determinist middle ground between behaviourism (hard determinism) and humanism (free will).

Conclusion. SLT offers a richer account of learning than pure behaviourism by including cognitive mediational processes and observational learning. Robust experimental evidence and clear practical applications support the theory, while limitations regarding ecological validity and biological factors place it as a strong but partial account of how behaviour is acquired.

3 The Cognitive Approach

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

- Internal **mental processes** — perception, attention, memory, language, thinking, decision-making — can and should be studied scientifically.
- Because mental processes cannot be observed directly, psychologists make **inferences** about them from behaviour.
- The mind operates like an **information-processing** system: input → processing → output.
- **Schemas** shape how we interpret new information.

The Study of Internal Mental Processes

The cognitive approach studies internal processes that **cannot be directly observed** — thinking, memory, problem-solving. Because these processes are private, researchers **infer** what is happening internally from systematic differences in observable behaviour. For example, longer reaction times to ambiguous words can be inferred to reflect competing mental representations.

The Role of Schema

A **schema** is a mental framework — a "package" of beliefs and expectations about a topic — built up through experience. Schemas help us interpret the world quickly (we know what to expect in a restaurant) but can also lead to **biases** when new information is forced to fit an existing schema. **Bartlett's (1932) "War of the Ghosts"** showed that participants distorted an unfamiliar Native American story to fit Western schemas when they recalled it, demonstrating that memory is *reconstructive* rather than literal.

The Use of Models

Because mental processes are not directly observable, cognitive psychologists use **models** to represent them. The 2025 spec refers to "the use of models" — covering both theoretical and computer-based approaches.

- **Theoretical models** use boxes and arrows to represent the structure and flow of information — e.g. the multi-store model of memory (Atkinson and Shiffrin 1968), the working memory model (Baddeley and Hitch 1974).
- **Computer models** — mental processes are programmed as algorithms; if the simulation behaves like a human, the model captures something real about cognition. This is the basis of much modern AI research.

Cognitive Neuroscience

Note on the 2025 spec: cognitive neuroscience has been **moved inside the biological approach** in the 2025 specification — see Section 4 — though it remains the bridge between cognition and biology. Brain-imaging techniques (fMRI, PET, EEG) allow psychologists to map specific cognitive functions onto specific brain

structures (e.g. Tulving's work on semantic vs episodic memory in the prefrontal cortex).

Evaluation

Strength — scientific and objective methods. A major strength of the cognitive approach is its use of rigorous, controlled experimental methods. Lab experiments, brain-imaging techniques (fMRI, PET) and reaction-time tasks allow internal processes to be measured indirectly but reliably. This is important because it gives cognitive psychology genuine scientific status — a marked improvement over the introspection-based methods of the 19th century. This strengthens the credibility of cognitive findings and the validity of inferences drawn from them.

Strength — wide range of practical applications. A further strength is the breadth of applications. The cognitive approach underpins cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) for depression and anxiety (see Clinical Psychology Section 6), the cognitive interview for improving eyewitness testimony (see Memory Section 6), and substantial advances in AI and human–computer interaction. This is important because applied success across multiple domains is strong evidence the underlying account of cognition captures something real. This strengthens the approach's practical and theoretical value.

Limitation — machine reductionism (computer analogy). A significant limitation is that the information-processing / computer model can be overly mechanical. Human cognition involves emotion, motivation and consciousness — features computers do not have. This is important because if cognitive models ignore these features, they may not capture the full reality of human thinking. This limits the cognitive approach to a partial account that benefits from being combined with biological and humanistic perspectives.

Limitation — based on inference (validity concerns). A further limitation is that cognitive findings are based on **inference** rather than direct observation of mental processes. Different researchers may draw different inferences from the same behavioural data, and inferences cannot be directly verified. This is important because it weakens the certainty of cognitive conclusions and means findings are always provisional. This is partially addressed by cognitive neuroscience, which links inferences to observable brain activity.

Limitation — low ecological validity in some research. Many classic cognitive studies use highly artificial tasks (e.g. recalling lists of nonsense syllables, reaction-time tasks). This is important because findings from these controlled tasks may not generalise to everyday cognition, which involves meaningful, context-rich material. This limits the external validity of some cognitive research, though field studies and applied work (e.g. eyewitness testimony research) help address this.

Conclusion. The cognitive approach is one of the dominant frameworks in modern psychology, providing rigorous methods, wide-ranging applications and a clear bridge to biology through cognitive neuroscience. Its limitations — reductionism to information processing, inferential basis and occasional artificiality — are real but well-recognised, and best addressed by integrating cognitive methods with biological and social approaches.

4 The Biological Approach

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

- All behaviour has a **biological basis**: genes, neurochemistry, hormones and brain structures.
- The mind lives in the brain — all thoughts and feelings ultimately have a physical, biological cause.
- Human behaviour has been shaped by **evolution** through natural selection.
- If a behaviour produces a survival/reproductive advantage, the underlying genes will be passed on to the next generation.

The Genetic Basis of Behaviour

Concept	Definition
Genotype	The genetic make-up of an individual — the actual genes they carry on their chromosomes. Fixed at conception.
Phenotype	The observable characteristics that result from the interaction of genotype with the environment. Identical twins share a genotype but can have different phenotypes (e.g. one becoming overweight, one not).
Evolution	Darwin's (1859) theory of natural selection: characteristics that increase survival and reproduction are passed to the next generation. Over time, adaptive characteristics become more common in the population.

Twin studies are the main method for investigating genetic contributions. **Monozygotic (MZ)** twins share 100% of their genes; **dizygotic (DZ)** twins share 50%. Higher concordance rates in MZ vs DZ twins suggest a genetic contribution. Example: schizophrenia concordance is ~40% in MZ twins vs ~7% in DZ twins.

Biological Structures and Neurochemistry

Behaviour is influenced by the structure and chemistry of the nervous system:

- **Brain structures** — different regions are associated with different functions (e.g. amygdala in emotion and fear; prefrontal cortex in decision-making; hippocampus in memory).
- **Neurotransmitters** — chemical messengers that transmit signals between neurons. Imbalances are linked to mental disorders (e.g. low serotonin → depression and OCD; high dopamine → schizophrenia).
- **Hormones** — chemicals released into the bloodstream by glands. Influence mood, sleep, stress (cortisol), aggression (testosterone) and many other behaviours.

Cognitive Neuroscience

Cognitive neuroscience — moved into the biological approach in the 2025 spec — is the scientific study of how cognitive functions emerge from the physical and chemical activity of neurons and brain structures. It uses brain-imaging techniques such as **fMRI** (functional magnetic resonance imaging), **PET** (positron emission tomography) and **EEG** (electroencephalography) to map mental processes onto specific brain regions.

Examples of cognitive-neuroscience findings:

- **Maguire et al. (2000)** — London taxi drivers have enlarged posterior hippocampi (spatial memory), and the size correlates with years of experience.
- **Tulving et al. (1994)** — PET scans showed semantic memories activate the left prefrontal cortex while episodic memories activate the right prefrontal cortex — supporting the distinction between memory types.
- **Broca's area** (left frontal lobe) — language production; damage produces Broca's aphasia.

Evaluation

Strength — scientific methods and objective measurement. A major strength of the biological approach is its use of objective, scientific techniques. Brain-imaging (fMRI, PET, EEG), twin studies, blood tests for neurotransmitter metabolites and genetic analyses produce measurable, replicable data. This is important because it gives the approach high scientific credibility and allows precise, testable claims. This strengthens the validity of biological findings and supports psychology's standing as a science.

Strength — practical applications (drug therapies). A further strength is the highly successful applied work derived from the approach. Biological understanding has produced SSRIs for depression and OCD, antipsychotics for schizophrenia, L-DOPA for Parkinson's and many other effective treatments. This is important because measurable improvements in millions of patients' lives are themselves strong evidence the biological mechanisms targeted are real. This strengthens the approach's applied and theoretical credibility.

Limitation — biological reductionism. A significant limitation is that the approach is **reductionist**. Reducing depression to "low serotonin" or schizophrenia to "high dopamine" loses the social, cognitive and developmental context in which mental disorders occur. This is important because patients with the same neurochemical profile can have very different experiences and respond differently to treatment. This limits the biological approach as a stand-alone account and supports interactionist models (e.g. diathesis–stress) that combine biology with environment.

Limitation — biological determinism. A further limitation is the strong **determinism** implied — if all behaviour is caused by biology, free will and moral responsibility become problematic. The Stephen Mobley case (where an MAOA defence was rejected by the court) illustrates the tension between biological determinism and legal accountability. This is an important issues-and-debates concern and supports a soft-deterministic interactionism over hard biological determinism.

Limitation — twin-study confounds. A further limitation is that twin-study evidence — central to many biological claims — can be confounded by shared environment. MZ twins are usually raised together and may be treated more similarly than DZ twins, inflating apparent genetic contributions. This is important because if some "genetic" concordance actually reflects shared environment, heritability estimates are overstated. Adoption studies (where twins are reared apart) partly address this but are rare and methodologically difficult.

Limitation — correlational neuroscience. A final limitation is that brain-imaging findings are often **correlational**. Showing that depression is associated with reduced hippocampal volume does not establish whether reduced volume causes depression, depression causes reduced volume, or a third factor causes both.

This is important because causal claims require experimental or longitudinal evidence beyond simple brain-imaging correlations.

Conclusion. The biological approach delivers rigorous methods and powerful applied treatments, and provides essential foundations through genetics, neurochemistry and cognitive neuroscience. Its core weaknesses — reductionism, determinism and correlational limits — mean it is best understood as a vital component of an interactionist account rather than a complete explanation of behaviour.

5 The Psychodynamic Approach

A-LEVEL

Developed by **Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)**, the **psychodynamic approach** emphasises the role of the **unconscious mind**, early childhood experience and unresolved internal conflicts in shaping adult behaviour and personality. Although less influential in modern academic psychology than the other approaches, it has had enormous cultural and clinical impact.

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

- Much of behaviour is driven by the **unconscious** — thoughts, memories and motives we are not aware of.
- Personality has three components: the **Id, Ego and Superego**, often in conflict.
- **Defence mechanisms** protect the conscious mind from unbearable anxiety produced by these conflicts.
- Adult behaviour and mental disorder are rooted in unresolved conflicts from **psychosexual stages** of childhood development.

The Role of the Unconscious

Freud divided the mind into three levels:

- **Conscious** — what we are aware of right now (a small fraction of mental life).
- **Preconscious** — thoughts and memories not currently in focus but easily brought to mind.
- **Unconscious** — repressed memories, drives and conflicts that influence behaviour without our awareness. Freud claimed the unconscious can be revealed through **dreams, slips of the tongue** ("Freudian slips") and **free association**.

The Structure of Personality — Id, Ego, Superego

Component	Operating principle	Develops	Function
Id	Pleasure principle	From birth (oral stage)	The primitive, instinctual part — driven by sexual and aggressive drives. Demands immediate gratification of needs.
Ego	Reality principle	~18 months (anal stage)	The rational, executive part — mediates between the Id's demands and external reality. Uses defence mechanisms to manage conflict.
Superego	Morality principle	~5–6 years (phallic stage)	The internalised moral compass — represents the values learned from parents and society. Judges the Ego and produces guilt when standards are violated.

A healthy personality requires a balance between the three components. Imbalance produces psychological disorders.

Defence Mechanisms

Defence mechanisms are unconscious strategies the Ego uses to protect itself from anxiety-producing thoughts and conflicts. The 2025 spec requires knowledge of three:

Mechanism	What it does	Example
Repression	Unconsciously pushing distressing memories or thoughts out of awareness into the unconscious.	A person unable to remember a traumatic childhood event.
Denial	Refusing to accept the reality of a distressing situation.	An alcoholic insisting they are "just a social drinker"; a grieving person behaving as if a loved one is still alive.
Displacement	Transferring negative emotions from their true source onto a safer target.	Telling off your sibling after being criticised by your boss; slamming the door after being told off by a parent.

Psychosexual Stages of Development

Freud proposed five stages of psychosexual development. Each stage focuses on a different erogenous zone, and unresolved conflict at any stage produces **fixation** — adult personality traits associated with that stage.

Stage	Age	Focus	Fixation produces
Oral	0–1 yr	Mouth (feeding)	Smoking, nail-biting, dependency, sarcasm.
Anal	1–3 yrs	Anus (toilet training)	<i>Anal-retentive</i> : obsessive, tidy, perfectionist. <i>Anal-expulsive</i> : messy, disorganised, reckless.
Phallic	3–6 yrs	Genitals (Oedipus / Electra complex)	Vanity, recklessness; difficulties with gender identity.
Latency	6–puberty	Earlier conflicts repressed; energy focused on socialisation, schoolwork.	(No fixation typically associated.)
Genital	Puberty +	Mature sexual interests in others.	Difficulty forming heterosexual relationships (Freud's view).

The **Oedipus complex** (boys) and **Electra complex** (girls) occur in the phallic stage — children unconsciously desire the opposite-sex parent and feel rivalry with the same-sex parent, which is resolved through identification with the same-sex parent.

Evaluation

Strength — explanatory power. A genuine strength of the psychodynamic approach is its remarkable explanatory range. It offers explanations for personality, gender development, moral development, mental disorders, dreams and slips of the tongue — within a single coherent framework. This is important because few psychological theories attempt to explain such a wide range of phenomena. This gives the approach considerable theoretical scope, even if individual claims are contested.

Strength — practical application (psychoanalysis). A further strength is the development of **psychoanalysis**, the first systematic "talking therapy" and the ancestor of modern psychotherapy. Modern psychodynamic therapies derived from Freud remain in clinical use. This is important because, regardless of theoretical disputes, Freud's clinical contribution shaped the entire field of psychotherapy. This strengthens the approach's applied and historical significance.

Limitation — unfalsifiable (lacks scientific status). The most serious limitation of the psychodynamic approach is that its core claims are **unfalsifiable**. The unconscious mind, repressed memories and unresolved Oedipal conflicts cannot be directly tested — any apparent contradictory evidence can be reinterpreted as resistance or further repression. This is important because, by Popper's criterion, unfalsifiable claims are not scientific. This limits the approach's status as a science and undermines its specific theoretical claims, even if its clinical legacy is substantial.

Limitation — case-study evidence (generalisability). A further limitation is the approach's reliance on **case studies** of a small number of (mostly female, Viennese, neurotic) clients — Anna O, Dora, Little Hans. This is important because findings from atypical individuals cannot be safely generalised to broader populations. This is an example of idiographic methodology that limits the population validity of psychodynamic claims and supports the need for nomothetic testing of any specific predictions.

Limitation — gender bias. Freud's theory is strongly gender-biased — the Oedipus complex was developed in detail, the Electra complex was added later and treated as a less satisfactory parallel. Freud also claimed female superegos are weaker than male, leading to claims that women are "less moral". This is important because gender-biased theories perpetuate stereotypes and can produce real social harm. This is a serious issues-and-debates concern and undermines the validity of the theory's claims about women.

Limitation — cultural and temporal validity. A further limitation is that Freud's theory reflects late-19th-century Viennese society — a sexually repressed, patriarchal, middle-class culture. This is important because conclusions drawn from this specific context may not generalise to modern multicultural societies, where sexual norms, family structures and attitudes to authority are very different. This limits the cultural and temporal validity of the theory.

Conclusion. The psychodynamic approach offers enormous explanatory range and gave birth to modern psychotherapy, but its unfalsifiable core claims, narrow evidence base and gender/cultural biases mean it is best treated as a foundational *historical* contribution rather than a current scientific theory.

6 Humanistic Psychology A-LEVEL

Humanistic psychology — sometimes called the "third force" in psychology — emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction against the determinism of both behaviourism and psychoanalysis. Its leading figures are **Abraham Maslow** and **Carl Rogers**.

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

- People have **free will** — they are active agents able to determine their own behaviour and development.
- People are inherently good and motivated toward **self-actualisation** — the realisation of their full potential.
- People should be studied as **whole individuals** (holistic), not broken into parts.
- Subjective experience is the proper subject of psychology — the world as experienced by the individual.

Free Will

Humanistic psychologists reject the determinism of other approaches. They argue that humans, unlike non-human animals, have **self-determination** — the capacity to choose how to act and to take responsibility for those choices. Rogers (1959) argued that as long as people are controlled by external pressures, they cannot take responsibility for their behaviour or change it; only *self-responsibility* makes personal growth possible.

Self-Actualisation and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Self-actualisation is the realisation of one's full potential — becoming the best one can be. Maslow (1943) proposed that this is the highest of a **hierarchy of needs**: lower needs must be reasonably satisfied before higher ones can be pursued.

Level (top to bottom)	Need	Examples
5. Self-actualisation	Realising one's full potential.	Creativity, personal growth, peak experiences.
4. Esteem	Respect from others and self-respect.	Achievement, recognition, status, self-confidence.
3. Love and belongingness	Intimate relationships, friendships, community.	Family, romantic relationships, friendships.
2. Safety	Security, stability, freedom from fear.	Stable housing, employment, health.
1. Physiological	Basic survival needs.	Food, water, sleep, warmth.

Maslow studied historical figures he believed had achieved self-actualisation (e.g. Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln) and identified shared characteristics: independence, creativity, deep relationships, accurate perception of reality, peak experiences.

Congruence and the Self (Rogers)

Rogers distinguished two aspects of the self:

- **Self-concept** — who we currently believe we are.
- **Ideal self** — who we want to be.

Congruence — agreement between self-concept and ideal self — is required for psychological health and self-actualisation.

Incongruence — a mismatch between the two — produces feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth and psychological distress.

Conditions of Worth

Rogers argued that children develop **conditions of worth** when parental love and approval are made conditional on behaving in specific ways ("I will only love you if you do well at school", "if you behave nicely"). The child internalises these conditions and develops a self-concept based on meeting them rather than on authentic self-expression. This leads to incongruence and psychological problems in adulthood.

The therapeutic remedy, in Rogers's **person-centred therapy**, is **unconditional positive regard** — the therapist accepts and values the client without conditions, allowing the client to develop a more authentic self-concept and move toward congruence.

Evaluation

Strength — promotes a positive, optimistic view of humans. A genuine strength of humanism is its positive view of human nature. By emphasising free will, growth and self-actualisation, the approach offers a more hopeful framework than the determinism of behaviourism or psychoanalysis. This is important because the framework one uses to understand patients shapes the kind of help offered — humanism's emphasis on agency and growth has helped reshape therapy, counselling and education. This strengthens the approach's applied and ethical value.

Strength — practical applications (person-centred therapy). A further strength is the highly influential applied work derived from the approach. Rogers's **person-centred therapy** remains a major form of psychotherapy worldwide, and humanistic ideas have shaped management theory, education and counselling. This is important because applied success across multiple domains is itself evidence the underlying account captures real features of human experience.

Strength — holism. A further strength is humanism's commitment to **holism** — treating each person as a whole, integrated individual rather than a sum of parts. This is important because much of what matters about a person — identity, relationships, meaning — exists at the whole-person level and cannot be captured by reductionist accounts. This strengthens humanism as a corrective to overly reductionist approaches.

Limitation — limited empirical evidence (validity concerns). A significant limitation is the lack of empirical support. Concepts like self-actualisation, congruence and the ideal self are difficult to operationalise and measure, and humanistic research has produced little hard data. This is important because, by the standards of contemporary scientific psychology, unverifiable concepts are difficult to evaluate. This limits humanism's standing as a scientific approach, even though it remains influential clinically.

Limitation — cultural bias. A further limitation is that humanism reflects **Western, individualist** values. Self-actualisation, autonomy and personal growth are central in Western individualist cultures but less prioritised in collectivist cultures, where family, community and social roles are more important. This is important because applying a Western framework universally is an example of imposed etic and limits the cross-cultural validity of humanistic theory.

Limitation — unrealistic view of human nature. A further limitation is that humanism may be overly optimistic. The assumption that humans are inherently good and growth-oriented ignores aggression, selfishness and destructiveness — phenomena that other approaches (psychodynamic, evolutionary) take more seriously. This is important because a framework that minimises the darker aspects of human behaviour may struggle to explain crime, war and abuse. This limits the explanatory range of the approach.

Limitation — abstract and difficult to operationalise. A final limitation is that humanism is often viewed as a set of "rather loose, abstract concepts" that resist clear definition. While this is partly the price of holistic, person-focused theorising, it makes humanism harder to integrate with the broader scientific community. This limits the approach's contribution to cumulative scientific psychology, even as it remains valuable for clinical practice.

Conclusion. Humanism's emphasis on free will, holism and personal growth provides an important corrective to the determinism and reductionism of other approaches, and has shaped therapy, education and management in lasting ways. Its scientific limitations — weak operationalisation, limited empirical evidence, cultural bias — mean it is best treated as a complementary perspective rather than a stand-alone explanation of behaviour.

7 Comparison of Approaches A-LEVEL

The AQA 2025 spec requires students to compare the six approaches on key issues. The most important dimensions on which they can be compared are listed below.

Comparison Table

Approach	Nature/Nurture	Free will / Determinism	Holism / Reductionism	Idiographic / Nomothetic	Scientific?
Behaviourist	Nurture (blank slate)	Hard environmental determinism	Environmental (S-R) reductionism	Nomothetic (general laws)	Yes — lab experiments
Social learning theory	Mainly nurture (with some cognition)	Soft determinism (mediational processes allow choice)	Less reductionist than behaviourism	Nomothetic	Yes — lab experiments (Bobo doll)
Cognitive	Interactionist	Soft determinism (decisions within cognitive limits)	Machine reductionism (information processing)	Nomothetic	Yes — lab experiments, brain imaging
Biological	Strongly nature	Hard biological determinism	Biological reductionism	Nomothetic	Yes — most scientific methods
Psychodynamic	Interactionist (drives + early experience)	Hard psychic determinism	Holistic (whole personality)	Idiographic (case studies)	No — unfalsifiable claims
Humanistic	Interactionist (mostly nurture)	Free will	Holistic (whole person)	Idiographic (subjective experience)	No — concepts hard to operationalise

Key Points of Comparison (For Essays)

(1) Views of human nature. Behaviourism and SLT see humans as *shaped by environment*; the biological approach sees them as *determined by genes and biology*; the psychodynamic approach sees them as *driven by unconscious conflicts*; the cognitive approach sees them as *information processors*; humanism sees them as *free agents striving for growth*.

(2) Methods used. Behaviourist, cognitive and biological approaches are most scientific, using controlled experiments, brain imaging and twin studies. The psychodynamic approach uses case studies, dreams and free association. Humanism uses subjective self-report and phenomenological methods. The most scientific approaches are the most reductionist; the most holistic approaches are the least scientific — a recurring tension.

(3) Explanations of mental disorder. Behaviourism explains disorders as faulty learning (e.g. phobias as conditioned responses); cognitive as faulty thinking (Beck); biological as faulty biology (low serotonin); psychodynamic as unresolved unconscious conflict; humanistic as incongruence between self-concept and ideal self.

(4) Treatments derived. Behaviourism → systematic desensitisation, flooding, token economies. SLT → role-modelling interventions. Cognitive → CBT. Biological → drug therapy. Psychodynamic → psychoanalysis. Humanistic → person-centred therapy. Modern clinical practice typically combines approaches (e.g. CBT + SSRIs for depression).

(5) Interactionism is the modern position. Contemporary psychology rarely adopts any single approach in its pure form. Most researchers and clinicians are **interactionist** — combining biological, cognitive and social-environmental explanations and treatments. The diathesis–stress model in clinical psychology is a clear example. The comparison of approaches is therefore best understood not as a competition but as a set of complementary perspectives, each capturing part of the picture.

EXAM TIP — ANSWERING COMPARISON QUESTIONS

A common 16-mark question asks you to compare two or more approaches. Strong answers pick **specific dimensions** (e.g. nature/nurture, determinism, scientific status) and contrast the approaches across those dimensions, rather than describing each approach separately. Use the comparison table above as a planning framework — pick 3 dimensions and write a paragraph contrasting your chosen approaches on each.

These revision notes were prepared for [Simply Psychology](#) and cover spec sections 3.2.1 (AS) and 4.2.1 (A-level) of the AQA Psychology 2025 specification. Definitions of *classical and operant conditioning*, *vicarious reinforcement*, *mediational processes*, *schema*, *genotype*, *phenotype*, *evolution*, *cognitive neuroscience*, *Id*, *Ego*, *Superego*, *defence mechanisms*, *psychosexual stages*, *self-actualisation*, *congruence* and *conditions of worth* follow AQA's official 2025 *Subject specific vocabulary*. For deeper coverage of any topic, see simplypsychology.org/perspective.html.