

Compatibilism

Compatibilists argue that determinism is compatible with human freedom, and that indeterminism is not compatible or at best incoherent. They feel (correctly) that there must be a deterministic or causal connection between our will and our actions. This allows us to take responsibility for our actions, including credit for the good and blame for the bad.

As long as the agent is free from external coercion, they have freedom of action. This is the compatibilist freedom we have, according to THOMAS HOBBS and DAVID HUME. It is the “negative freedom” of ISAIAH BERLIN.

Compatibilists (or “soft determinists” as they have been known since WILLIAM JAMES) identify free will with freedom of action - the lack of external constraints. We are free, and we have free will, if we are not in physical chains. But freedom of the will is different from freedom of action.

And our wills can be free, even if we are in physical chains.

Many compatibilists accept the view of a causal chain of events going back indefinitely in time, consistent with the laws of nature, with the plan of an omniscient God, or with other determinisms. As long as our own will is included in that causal chain, we are free, they say. And they think causality in nature is related to the very possibility of reason and logic. Without causality, they say, we could not be certain of the truths of our arguments.

Compatibilists don't mind all their decisions being caused by a metaphysical chain of events, as long as they are not in physical chains.

We think compatibilists should be classified according to the particular determinisms they think are compatible with human freedom. It is one thing to claim compatibility with physics, another to claim compatibility with God's foreknowledge, etc.

An increasing number of compatibilists, often reluctantly, accept the view that random quantum mechanical events occur in



the world. Whether in the physical world, in the biological world (where they are a key driver of genetic mutations), or in the mind, randomness and uncaused events are real.

Other compatibilists, DANIEL DENNETT, for example, simply insist that such genuine irreducible randomness is not needed for human freedom, or even for biological evolution. Others point out that even if strict **determinism** were true (which it isn't), compatibilist freedom of action, in DAVID HUME's sense, would still exist. I agree. This would be so.

Quantum events introduce the possibility of accidents, novelty, and human creativity. Compatibilists who admit that such **indeterminism** exists might very likely be convinced of a stronger argument for human freedom that still provides an **adequately determined** will.

I call this "**comprehensive compatibilism**," in which free will is compatible *both* with adequate determinism (limited to the real determinism that we have in the world) *and* with indeterminism (constrained to not causing any of our actions directly, but simply providing **alternative possibilities** for the **adequately determined** will to choose from).

Comprehensive compatibilism is developed in Chapter 28.

Giving Compatibilists What They Want

1. They Want Determinism, especially **determination** of their will by their motives and feelings, their character and values.

So let us ask them two simple questions:

"First, Do you agree that there is some physical indeterminism in the universe?" By which of course we mean quantum mechanical indeterminacy.

"And second, do you agree that quantum mechanical indeterminism normally has no observable effect on large physical structures?" By which we mean that the world is "adequately determined."



2. They Want Intelligible Freedom. Let’s ask a third simple question,

“If the indeterminism only provided genuine possible **alternatives** for action and thought, if it did not impair the **adequately determined** will in any way, if it does not directly cause any action, is such a freedom and element of unpredictability acceptable?”

3. They Want Moral Responsibility. So finally, let’s ask one last question,

“Would you agree that the adequately determined will, making its selection from among such unpredictable actions or thoughts, can be held morally responsible for its choices?”

If you are a compatibilist, what are your answers?

Incompatibilism

PETER VAN INWAGEN gave incompatibilism a new meaning in his 1983 *Essay on Free Will*. His new definition changed the taxonomy of free will positions (see Chapter 6). Van Inwagen accepts the lack of **alternative possibilities** (in what he calls the **Direct Argument** and others describe as the **Actual Sequence** of events), as compatibilists have done, especially since the 1969 work of HARRY FRANKFURT.

Incompatibilists of many stripes now appear - Source Incompatibilists, Leeway Incompatibilists, Hard and Soft Incompatibilists, and Broad and Narrow Incompatibilists. Libertarians - of many kinds as well - all get lumped together with Hard Determinists as Incompatibilists in van Inwagen’s new catch-all category.

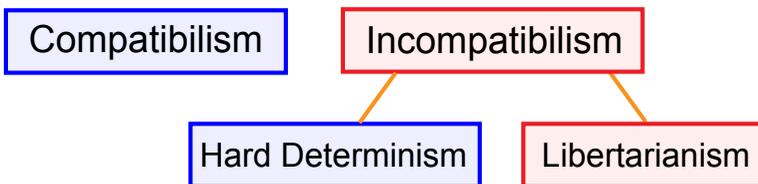


Figure 11-1. A compatibilist-incompatibilist taxonomy.

