

Chapter 28



Comprehensive Compatibilism

Comprehensive compatibilists believe that Free Will can be *reconciled* both with **adequate determinism** (as DAVID HUME and R.E. HOBART believed) and with **indeterminism** (as many thinkers since WILLIAM JAMES and I believe).

Comprehensive compatibilists also believe in a free will model that is compatible with biological evolution, a human free will that could have evolved naturally from “behavioral freedom” in lower animals. The two-stage model is thus *triple* compatible.

Free will is not a metaphysical mystery or gift of God. It evolved from a natural biophysical property of all organisms

Comprehensive compatibilists believe that normally actions are **adequately determined** by deliberations prior to a decision, including one’s character and values, one’s feelings and desires, in short, one’s reasons and motives. They believe that free will is “**reasons responsive**.” This is traditional **self-determination**.

Comprehensive compatibilists put limits on both **determinism** and **indeterminism**. Pure **chance**, irreducible randomness, or **quantum indeterminacy** in the two-stage model of free will is limited in the first stage to generating **alternative possibilities**.

But also note that sometimes we can “deliberately” choose to act randomly, when there is no obvious reason to do one thing rather than another. This resembles the ancient “**liberty of indifference**,” which I call **undetermined liberty**.

Comprehensive compatibilists believe that humans are free from strict physical determinism - or **pre-determinism**, and all the other diverse forms of determinism.¹

They accept the existence of ontological chance, but believe that when chance is the *direct and primary* cause of actions, it precludes agent control and **moral responsibility**.

¹ See Chapter 9.



Note that for information philosophy and its theory of values, there is a critical **separation** of the question of free will from questions about moral responsibility.²

The existence of **free will** is a scientific question for physics, biology, psychology, and neuroscience.

Moral responsibility, on the other hand, is a cultural question for ethicists and sociologists. Information philosophy also separates responsibility from the ideas of retributive punishment, which is still another social and cultural question.

Libertarians believe that determinism and freedom are incompatible. Freedom requires some form of **indeterminism**.

But the two-stage models of free will favored by **comprehensive compatibilists** also require **adequate determination** of an action by the agent's motives and reasons, following deliberation and evaluation of the **alternative possibilities** for action generated by that indeterminism. This we call **self-determination**.

Critics of libertarianism (both determinists and compatibilists) attack the view of some extreme libertarians that chance is the direct cause of actions or even that actions are not caused at all. If an agent's decisions are not connected in any way with character and other personal properties, they rightly claim that the agent can hardly be held responsible for them.

ROBERT KANE'S "torn decisions" and Self-Forming Actions are an exception to this criticism, because the agent has excellent reasons and has put in great efforts for acting whichever way the ultimate decision goes. Kane's SFAs are special cases of our **undetermined liberties**.³

Many determinists and perhaps most compatibilists now accept the idea that quantum physics requires real indeterminism in the universe. Comprehensive compatibilists can agree with them that if indeterministic chance were the direct and primary cause of our actions, that would not be freedom with responsibility.

Although any quantum event is probabilistic, quantum processes in macroscopic objects like biological organisms are highly regular, because of the statistical law of large numbers. Even in

2 See Chapter 20.

3 See Chapter 24. and page 365.



microscopic structures like atoms and molecules, it is quantum mechanics that provides the phenomenal stability of such structures over cosmic lifetimes.

I hope that determinists and compatibilists might also agree that if chance is not a direct and primary cause of our actions, such chance would do no harm to responsibility. In this case, **comprehensive compatibilists** should be able to convince some **hard determinists** of their position.

In a personal communication, GALEN STRAWSON agrees that comprehensive compatibilism offers a “kind of freedom that is available” to us. If chance is limited to providing real **alternative possibilities** to be considered by the **adequately determined** will, it provides an intelligible freedom and can explain both freedom and **creativity**.

Comprehensive compatibilists can give the determinists, at least the compatibilists, the kind of freedom they say they want, one that provides an **adequately determined** will and actions for which we can take responsibility.

As to the indeterminists, they should know that the model of comprehensive compatibilism uses indeterminism in two places, first in the generation of alternative possibilities in the first stage of the two-stage model, and then, when the two-stage model does not result in a single act of **self-determination**, in ROBERT KANE’s cases of the “torn” decisions of Self-Forming Actions.

I should note that Kane is concerned that my attempt to change the terminology of the free will debates will only confuse issues further. I am sensitive to that criticism. But in my opinion, the emphasis on PETER VAN INWAGEN’s “incompatibilism” (discussed in Chapter 6) has set back understanding. In any case, my goal is only to restore the traditional terminology, to *reconcile* liberty not with necessity, but with **self-determination**.

What could be simpler than a return to the traditional categories of the free will debates, with the new insight that my two-stage model can reconcile free will with *both* adequate determinism *and* indeterministic libertarianism?



A Taxonomy for Comprehensive Compatibilism

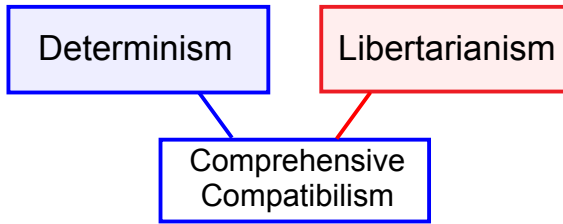


Figure 28-1. A simplified taxonomy of free will categories

You will recognize the traditional taxonomy of Chapter 6, but instead of the compatibilists being determinists who euphemistically call their position “free will,” they now have an element of genuine, but limited, **indeterminism**, to provide them with origination, creativity, and to make them the authors of their lives.

How Comprehensive Compatibilism Does Otherwise in the Same Circumstances

The physical location of indeterminacy in the brain⁴ and the timing of chance mental events relative to the decision are the two most critical problems for any model of libertarian free will.

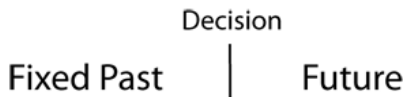


Figure 28-2. Decisions considered as a point in time.

My two-stage **Cogito** model of free will expands the decision from a single point in time between the “fixed past” and the future.

It becomes a two-stage process, first a “free” stage, then a “will” stage.” Each of these takes some time.

Note that the two-stage model explains how an agent can be in exactly the “same circumstances,” and given the fixed past and the laws of nature, the agent can nevertheless act differently, that is to say, choose to **do otherwise**.⁵

⁴ See informationphilosopher.com/freedom/location.html

⁵ See Chapter 13, p. 199 for more details.



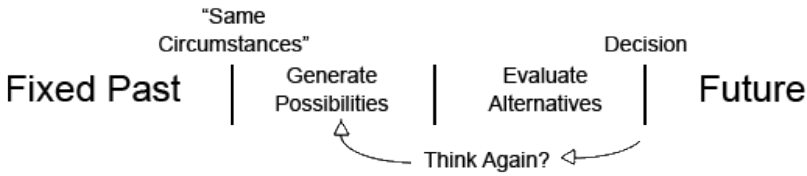


Figure 28-3. Doing otherwise in the “same circumstances.”

This is because the decision is at the end point of a temporal process that begins with those “same” circumstances. The decision-making process is not an instant in time.

Note also that the decision is not determined as soon as possibilities are generated and the alternatives evaluated. The agent may decide that none of the options is good enough and, time permitting, go back to “think again,” to generate more possibilities.

The decision is **adequately determined**, but it is not **pre-determined** from the “fixed past” just before the circumstances.

We can now integrate ROBERT KANE’S Self-Forming Actions (SFAs) into **comprehensive compatibilism**. My Two-Stage Model and Kane’s Self-Forming Actions are connected seamlessly in a temporal sequence. The sequence uses indeterminism at the start, to generate **alternative possibilities** for action that could not have been pre-determined, and it again uses indeterminism at the end, in those cases where the second-stage of the two-stage model can not narrow down the possibilities to a single self-determined action.

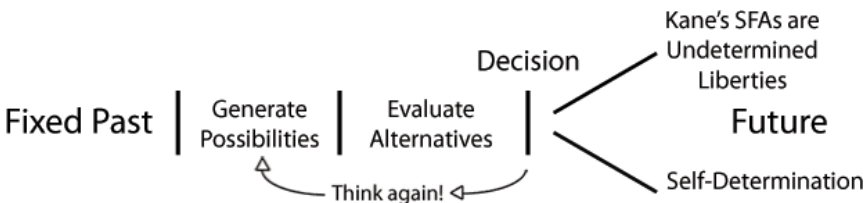


Figure 28-4. Undetermined liberties and self-determination.

Undetermined liberties include Kane’s SFAs, which are “torn” decisions that require effort to resolve conflicts between moral and prudential choices. See Chapter 24.

