

Freedom Within Causality: A Defence of Situated Agency in the Determinism and Compatibilism Debate

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Abstract

The question of whether human beings possess 'Free Will' remains one of the most persistent and influential philosophical debates. Determinism asserts that all events, including human decisions, are the necessary consequences of prior conditions. Libertarian theories claim that humans possess the ability to originate actions independently of causal chains. Compatibilism attempts to reconcile these competing frameworks by redefining 'Free Will' in a manner that does not conflict with determinism. This paper builds upon compatibilist reasoning and interdisciplinary developments in embodied cognition, phenomenology, and neuroscience to propose a new conceptual model of autonomy. The core argument is that human beings cannot control the biological, environmental, and historical conditions they inherit or encounter, yet retain meaningful agency in how they interpret, evaluate, and respond to those conditions. The paper calls this capacity 'Situated Agency' and defines it as a layered form of autonomy grounded in reflection, embodied cognition, and reasons-responsiveness. Situated agency accounts for unconscious neural processes identified in empirical research while also preserving agency as described in phenomenological analyses of reflection and experiential ownership. The result is a synthesis in which human freedom remains coherent within a causally determined world.

Keywords: free will, compatibilism, determinism, libertarian, situated agency

The debate between 'Free Will' and Determinism extends beyond abstract metaphysics and influences law, moral philosophy, psychology, and the lived experience of agency. Whether individuals are genuinely free to choose their actions, or whether every preference, belief, and decision is the necessary unfolding of prior causes, has shaped ethical theories related to responsibility and moral judgment as well as theories of consciousness and personhood (Dennett, 1984; and Fischer and Ravizza, 1998). Determinism asserts that the universe operates according to laws of cause and effect, and if these laws govern mental and bodily actions, then human autonomy appears threatened. Contemporary science often strengthens this view, because research in cognitive neuroscience suggests that neural activity may precede conscious awareness of intention (Libet, 1985; Soon et al., 2008). Compatibilism rejects the assumption that determinism and 'Free Will' are mutually exclusive. Instead, it proposes a revised meaning of 'Free Will', one that focuses on voluntary action, internal motivation, and responsiveness to reflection and reasons rather than exemption from causation. This line of thought traces to Hume's analysis of liberty and necessity (1748/2008) and develops through modern work by Frankfurt (1969, 1988), Strawson (1962), Dennett (1984), & Fischer and Ravizza (1998). This paper adopts a compatibilist foundation and builds upon it by developing a distinct argument. Human freedom exists not in the power to break away from causation, but in the capacity to choose among possible responses when confronted with circumstances shaped by causes beyond one's control. Human life contains elements of inevitability yet contains opportunities for deliberation and decision-making. The capacity to evaluate alternatives and

consciously choose one path over another constitutes freedom. This is not an absolute or metaphysical freedom, but a functional, situated autonomy relevant to actual human life.

Determinism: Structure, Definitions, and Claims

Determinism is often presented as a unified doctrine, although in practice it includes multiple variants that shape the 'Free Will' debate differently. Classical formulations treat determinism as the position that every event follows necessarily from antecedent conditions combined with the laws of nature, a position historically associated with the mechanistic worldview of early modern science and exemplified by Pierre-Simon Laplace's thought experiment (Laplace, 1814/1951). In contemporary discussions, determinism intersects not only with physics, but with biology, psychology, neuroscience, and social theory.

Causal Determinism

Causal determinism claims that all events have sufficient causes that render them unavoidable. The historical foundation of this view comes from mechanistic physics and its assumption that the universe functions as a closed, law-governed system. Laplace proposed that a hypothetical intelligence that knew every particle's position and the laws governing motion could deduce past and future events with certainty (Laplace, 1814/1951). This model of determinism continues to influence philosophical debate, even though contemporary physics complicates the picture through quantum models that introduce probabilistic structure rather than absolute predictability. Despite this, most compatibilists argue that unpredictability does not

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entail metaphysical freedom because randomness does not constitute agency (Dennett, 1984; Kane, 1996).

Biological and Genetic Determinism

Recent biological research extends determinism into human behaviour by emphasizing the influence of genetics, neural architecture, evolutionary inheritance, and neurochemical regulation. Studies in behavioural genetics suggest that traits such as temperament, inhibition strength, impulsivity, and emotional affect correlate with biological markers (Gazzaniga, 2011). Neuroscientific work in volition further complicates the notion of conscious authorship. Libet's initial experiments claimed that neural readiness potentials precede conscious awareness of choice (Libet, 1985), and later work by Soon and colleagues suggested that brain activity may predict choices seconds before conscious intention reports (Soon et al., 2008). These findings have been interpreted by some as evidence that the conscious self does not initiate action. Others, including Frankfurt (1988), Gallagher (2005), & Dennett (1984), argue that these interpretations misunderstand the layered nature of agency and the difference between initiating an action and endorsing an action.

Environmental and Psychological Determinism

Environmental determinism emphasizes the role of learning history, cultural influence, socioeconomic structures, trauma, family dynamics, and educational context in shaping human cognition and behaviour. This branch of determinism is strongly represented in psychology and social theory. Individuals develop preferences, habits, biases, and reasoning strategies through interaction with their environment. Philosophers including Gallagher (2005) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) argue that embodiment and situatedness shape perception and action before explicit deliberation emerges.

Determinism and the Threat to Responsibility

The philosophical tension between determinism and freedom becomes acute when applied to moral and legal responsibility. If every action is the necessary effect of prior causes, responsibility may appear unjustified. In criminal justice and ethical theory, this challenge has been raised by both libertarians and hard determinists. Strawson (1962) argues that responsibility persists because it is grounded in human relational practices rather than in metaphysical independence. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) develop this further by proposing that moral responsibility requires reasons-responsiveness, not exemption from causal influence.

Compatibilism: Reconciling Necessity and Choice

Compatibilism rejects the premise that determinism and 'Free Will' are incompatible. Instead, it claims that freedom can be understood in a way that does not require exemption from causal structure. This tradi-

tion originates in Hume's view that liberty consists in acting in accordance with one's motives and character without external interference rather than in the ability to violate causation (Hume, 1748/2008).

Classical Compatibilism

Classical compatibilism defines 'Free Will' as voluntary action rather than uncaused action. If a person acts in accordance with their internal motivations and could have acted differently if they had chosen differently, then they are free. This distinction between internal and external constraint forms the foundation for modern compatibilist theories.

Contemporary Compatibilism

Contemporary analytic compatibilism expands this earlier formulation by refining concepts of hierarchical desire, endorsement, and autonomy. Frankfurt (1969) introduced the distinction between first order desires and second order endorsements, claiming that agency arises when an individual identifies with a motivating desire. Dennett (1984) & Fischer and Ravizza (1998) further develop compatibilism using a reasons-responsiveness account in which freedom requires the ability not only to act but to reflect, evaluate, and revise behaviour.

Phenomenology contributes a complementary framework emphasizing embodied intentionality. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) argues that agency emerges through perceptual engagement with the world rather than through abstract internal reasoning alone, and Gallagher (2005) describes agency as involving pre-reflective bodily awareness in conjunction with reflection. Neuroscience provides additional context by illustrating how unconscious and conscious processes interact rather than compete for causal priority (Eagleman, 2011).

Situated Agency: Core Argument

Traditional compatibilist accounts provide a foundation for explaining how freedom and determinism can coexist, however they often neglect embodied and environmental dimensions of human experience. The central argument of this paper is that human agency exists within causality rather than outside it. Human beings do not possess a form of metaphysical freedom that operates independently of prior conditions or natural laws. Instead, they possess a capacity for autonomy that emerges through reflection, deliberation, and intentional choice. This autonomy is not absolute; however, it remains significant and meaningful.

The position may be expressed in a conceptual structure:

- **A.** There exist causes or conditions that an individual does not choose.
- **B.** These causes create a situation in which the individual must act.

- C. The individual's response is influenced by reflection, deliberation, and evaluation.

The transition from situation to response is where agency emerges. While the situation itself may be causally determined, the response involves selective engagement, consideration of alternatives, and intentional direction of action.

'Situated Agency', therefore, refers to the capacity of human agents to exercise reflective, embodied, and reason-responsive control within constraints imposed by biological, environmental, psychological, and sociohistorical conditions. This concept includes three structural claims. First, an agent does not choose the foundational conditions that shape temperament, embodiment, environment, and cultural shaping. Second, these conditions generate contexts and demands that require action. Third, the agent retains the capacity to interpret, evaluate, and respond using reflective deliberation and embodied intentionality even when choices occur within causal constraints. Situated agency therefore describes autonomy not as independence from causation, but as participation within it, where freedom consists in reflective response rather than spontaneous exemption from causal influence. The self is understood as a locus of reflective processing. It evaluates possibilities, envisions outcomes, and selects behavioural pathways. The individual acts as a mediator between circumstance and consequence. In this sense, the person is a causal node rather than a passive endpoint.

The Role of Reflection, Meaning, and Interpretation

A key distinction in this framework is the difference between reaction and response. A reaction is immediate, automatic, and often unconscious. Akin to reflex. A response involves reflection, assessment, and intention. To respond is to pause, evaluate, and choose a course of action. Freedom, therefore, is not the absence of causes. It is the presence of reflection. Reflection enables the distinction between reaction and response. Without reflection, human behaviour would resemble conditioned reflex. Reflection creates cognitive distance between impulse and action.

Reflection as internal distance. Reflection allows individuals to examine motives, evaluate consequences, and align actions with values. This shift transforms immediacy into deliberation. Frankfurt (1969, 1988) argues that reflective endorsement is central to agency, and Gallagher (2005) describes reflection as layered on top of embodied intentionality.

Metacognition and self-awareness. Metacognition refers to the ability to examine thought and evaluate whether decisions align with values. This capacity supports reasons responsive freedom. Nagel (1986) describes this ability as reflective distance. Metacog-

niton demonstrates that intentional action extends beyond automatic neural processes.

Meaning as interpretation. Human beings do not merely experience the world, they interpret it. Two individuals may encounter similar events yet respond differently based on meaning frameworks. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) describes perception as interpretive rather than passive. Meaning-making demonstrates that behaviour is not fully predetermined by stimulus conditions.

Freedom in deliberation. Deliberation is central to this model. It is the capacity to consider options, weigh benefits and consequences, and commit to a course of action based on reflection. This process includes:

- Counterfactual imagination
- Ethical assessment
- Long-term reasoning
- Self-regulation

These abilities transform deterministic conditions into a landscape of possible actions. If determinism is true, it may appear that autonomy collapses into mechanistic necessity. However, several lines of philosophical and empirical reasoning show that meaningful human agency survives within causation.

Causation Does Not Imply a Single Predictable Outcome

Even if every event has a cause, complex systems can produce multiple possible outcomes. Human cognition includes competing values, emotional states, memories, predictions, and learned behavioural strategies. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) & Dennett (1984) argue that this complexity provides degrees of freedom that allow deliberation even within constraint.

Counterfactual Reasoning as Evidence of Choice

Human beings imagine alternatives, evaluate possible scenarios, and project hypothetical futures. The capacity to think in terms of conditional possibility indicates that action is not simply a matter of automatic response. Gallagher (2005) & Clark and Chalmers (1998) argue that counterfactual reasoning is part of a cognitive system extended beyond the brain into language, environment, and culture.

Regulation and Control

Human beings can regulate impulses, delay gratification, restrain anger, and pursue long term commitments. This regulatory capacity is central to responsibility. Frankfurt (1988) & Shoemaker (2011) argue that regulation is part of authorship because it involves reflective endorsement rather than automatic reaction.

Situational Rather Than Absolute Freedom

Moral responsibility does not require independence from causation. It requires the ability to act with awareness, understanding, and deliberation. Responsibility therefore concerns the structure of agency rather than the metaphysics of origin.

Moral Responsibility in a Determined World

If situated agency is accepted, responsibility becomes defensible within a deterministic structure. A viable account of 'Free Will' must explain responsibility, identity, and agency. Freedom does not require the ability to violate causal structure. It requires reflective engagement and alignment between action and endorsed values. This view supports both moral practice and lived experience.

Responsibility and Reasons-Responsiveness

Responsibility applies when an individual can recognize reasons, understand consequences, and modify behaviour accordingly. This view aligns with the analytic model of Fischer and Ravizza (1998) and is supported by phenomenological descriptions of reflective agency (Gallagher, 2005). Individuals who lack the capacity to understand meaning, consequences, or social significance of their actions, such as young children or individuals under coercion, are not held responsible. This principle aligns with both philosophical and legal frameworks.

Responsibility as Recognition of Agency

Assigning responsibility acknowledges agency. It communicates that the individual is not merely the endpoint of causal chain reactions, but an active participant in shaping outcomes. Strawson (1962) argues that interpersonal experience itself sustains responsibility, and this relational view aligns with contemporary interdisciplinary approaches.

Implications for Ethics, Law, and Identity

Legal systems recognize degrees of accountability. A person under duress is treated differently from a person acting with full awareness and capacity. Minors are treated differently from adults. Individuals lacking cognitive capacity may be exempt from legal punishment.

These distinctions parallel the layered autonomy framework. Responsibility corresponds to the degree of reflective capacity present during the act. The law does not require metaphysical 'Free Will'. It requires the ability to reason, foresee consequences, and exercise control.

Ethical frameworks assume that individuals can distinguish between right and wrong and act according to those distinctions. If actions were entirely predetermined without room for interpretation or deliberation, ethics would have no foundation. Praise and blame presuppose that the agent possessed awareness, evaluated alternatives, and made a decision that reflected those evaluations. The situated agency model supports

this assumption. Ethical responsibility applies when an individual could recognize the moral landscape of a decision and respond to it through reflection.

Identity is a Continuum of chosen and unchosen elements. Personal identity is shaped by inherited and constructed elements. Biological makeup and early experiences are unchosen. Values, commitments, and responses evolve through reflection and intentional choice. Individuals become, not simply discover, themselves. Identity is therefore not static. It is shaped at the intersection of circumstance and response. Situated agency recognizes that individuals participate in authoring their identity over time. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) describes identity as embodied and evolving. Sartre (1956) emphasizes interpretation. Situated agency aligns with both insights.

Compatibility with Lived Experience

A convincing philosophical account must resonate with lived reality. Human beings experience themselves as capable of reflection, deliberation, and revision. They describe decision making using terms that imply agency such as choice, intention, and responsibility. Strawson (1962) argues that interpersonal experience presupposes agency. Embodied cognition research supports this observation. Individuals experience themselves as agents, not passive observers. These expressions do not resemble deterministic inevitability or random spontaneity. They reflect a structured autonomy embedded in reality.

Individuals experience themselves as agents capable of reflection and modification of behaviour. This experiential dimension complements the analytical argument. Agency evolves across the lifespan rather than appearing fully formed. Developmental psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience suggest that individuals acquire increasing capacity for reflective control through learning, practice, and maturation.

Learning from action and consequence. Human beings learn through feedback. Mistakes, reflection, and revision contribute to growth. This pattern indicates intentional shaping of behaviour rather than random variation. If agency were illusory, change would lack pattern and purpose. Instead, learning reflects adaptive self-modification grounded in reflection, which aligns with Fischer and Ravizza's (1998) account of developing moral competence and with Gallagher's (2005) understanding of embodied learning.

The role of habit. Habits structure experience, perception, and action. For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), habits are not merely unconscious routines, but embodied forms of intentionality that allow individuals to interact fluently with the world. Habits can either support or hinder autonomy depending on whether they align with endorsed values. The capacity to form, revise, and resist habits demonstrates top-down regulation.

Autonomy as practice. Freedom in the situated agency model is not simply a metaphysical condition or innate attribute. It is a practice. Individuals develop autonomy through reflection, interpretation, and the repetition of self-regulation. This view aligns with both virtue ethics and contemporary cognitive science perspectives that describe executive functioning as strengthened through repeated engagement rather than static possession.

Situated Choice and Layered Autonomy

The account of ‘Free Will’ defended in this paper views autonomy as layered rather than binary. This framework integrates analytic compatibilism, phenomenology, and cognitive science to produce a clearer understanding of responsibility. At the foundational level, genetic predispositions, neural design, temperament, and early developmental conditions shape behavioural tendencies. Neuroscientific work shows that emotional responsiveness and cognitive style correlate with neural structure and developmental history (Eagleman, 2011). A second layer consists of acquired beliefs, habits, and interpretive frameworks. These emerge through education, cultural participation, social learning, and lived experience. Unlike the foundational layer, these elements are partially modifiable through reflection, exposure, and reinterpretation. A third layer involves conscious deliberation and reflective action. Phenomenological analysis describes this as the capacity for interpretive engagement rather than detached calculation (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Analytic work describes it as responsiveness to reasons (Fischer & Ravizza, 1998). Cognitive science describes it as top-down regulation and executive function. This layered account implies that autonomy develops. Children do not begin life with fully formed deliberative capacity. Instead, autonomy strengthens through learning, reflection, and social development. This view aligns with both legal responsibility frameworks and developmental psychology. Human beings revise beliefs, reinterpret past experiences, and adjust patterns of behaviour. If agency were illusory, change would be random rather than patterned. Instead, development reflects intentional direction. Freedom includes the ability to shape identity over time. Sartre (1956) described freedom as the capacity to transcend one’s facticity through interpretation. Gallagher (2005) describes identity as enacted and continuously negotiated. Analytic theories describe identity as reflection grounded in stable values. Situated agency incorporates these ideas. Freedom is not merely about isolated decisions, but the capacity to form and sustain commitments.

Limits of Agency

No account of ‘Free Will’ claims total autonomy. Human reasoning is bounded by biological, cognitive, emotional, and contextual conditions.

Biological and Cognitive Constraints

Human reasoning is bounded by cognitive limits. Biases, emotional tendencies, and physiological responses shape behaviour. Autonomy exists within these constraints rather than beyond them.

Social and Environmental Influence

Culture, relationships, and institutions influence values and beliefs. While individuals may resist or reinterpret these influences, they cannot entirely escape them. Autonomy includes the ability to critically engage with social forces rather than complete independence from them.

Situational Pressure and Conflict

Choice often occurs under emotional, social, or temporal pressure. The ability to reflect varies with context. Agency is not identical in all circumstances. It fluctuates. Recognizing limits does not negate autonomy. It clarifies how autonomy functions.

Objections and Counterarguments

Any defence of ‘Free Will’ must address the strongest objections raised by strict determinism, neuroscience, and libertarianism. These objections challenge both conceptual coherence and empirical plausibility. Engaging them clarifies what kind of freedom remains possible within a causally structured world.

Objection: Determinism Eliminates Alternative Possibilities

One influential objection argues that if determinism is true, then no genuine alternatives exist, therefore agency collapses into inevitability. This objection is central to in-compatibilist interpretations of ‘Free Will’, including some versions of libertarianism and hard determinism. Critics contend that if every action follows necessary causal conditions, then the language of choice, intention, and possibility is misleading.

Compatibilist responses argue that alternative possibilities do not need to be metaphysically uncaused to count as meaningful. Dennett (1984) argues that probabilistic branching, counterfactual reasoning, and internal conflict demonstrate functional plurality within determinism. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) maintain that what matters for moral responsibility is not metaphysical freedom, but responsiveness to reasons in a range of hypothetical circumstances.

Objection: Neuroscience Reduces Choice to Neural Activity

Empirical work in neuroscience has been interpreted by some as evidence against ‘Free Will’. Libet’s experiments suggested that neural readiness potentials arise before conscious awareness of choice (Libet, 1985). Later work by Soon and colleagues claimed that neural patterns could predict decisions seconds before participants reported conscious intention (Soon et al., 2008). These findings have been taken by some schol-

ars to imply that consciousness is not the originator of action. However, Gallagher (2005), Eagleman (2011), and Frankfurt (1988) argue that these studies do not undermine agency. Instead, they illustrate that agency is layered and involves both pre-reflective and reflective processes. Defenders of compatibilism respond that unconscious neural preparation does not eliminate voluntary authorship, because authorship concerns endorsement and regulation, not temporal primacy.

Objection: If Personality Is Caused, Authorship Is Illusory

Another objection states that if personality traits, values, and beliefs emerge from causal conditions, then individuals cannot claim authorship of action. This objection assumes that authorship requires independence from causation. Compatibilists challenge this assumption. Frankfurt (1988) argues that authorship arises when individuals endorse and identify with motives. Fischer and Ravizza (1998) similarly claim that responsibility involves reflective ownership rather than metaphysical origination.

Objection: Libertarian Freedom Is the Only Real Freedom

Libertarian theories claim that 'Free Will' requires the ability to act independently of causal influence. Sartre (1956) argued that consciousness transcends causal determination because it is defined by its ability to negate and reinterpret its conditions. Some libertarians maintain that without metaphysical independence, responsibility would collapse. Compatibilist and phenomenological responses challenge this assumption. Dennett (1984) argues that uncaused choice would be indistinguishable from randomness. Gallagher (2005) maintains that meaning and agency arise from embodied engagement, not from causal exemption. The present framework aligns with these responses. Situated agency preserves autonomy without requiring metaphysical detachment from conditions.

Final Objection: Identity Over Time

A final objection claims that if values, beliefs, and dispositions result from causes outside personal control, and if these continue to change over time, then no stable agent exists to claim authorship of action. This objection treats identity as something fixed and unchanging and assumes that without permanence responsibility collapses.

Compatibilists and phenomenologists challenge this assumption. Personal identity does not require static traits, but continuity of reflective structure. Shoemaker (2011) argues that responsibility depends on psychological continuity involving memory, reasoning, and evaluative stance. Gallagher (2005) similarly describes identity as enacted and ongoing rather than fixed. Situated agency aligns with this view. Agency persists because reflection persists even as values evolve.

Conclusion

The debate between 'Free Will' and determinism has often been structured around two extremes. One position claim that autonomy requires metaphysical independence from causation. The other claims that if determinism is true, agency and responsibility collapse. The situated agency model offers a position between these extremes. It integrates analytic compatibilism, phenomenology, cognitive science, and responsibility theory to show that human beings can be both causally situated and reflectively autonomous. Human beings do not choose their foundational conditions. Genetics, embodiment, developmental history, and environment shape cognitive tendencies, emotional patterns, and interpretive frameworks. However, individuals retain the capacity to evaluate alternatives, reinterpret meaning, regulate impulses, and align action with endorsed values. This capacity constitutes meaningful autonomy.

Situated agency describes freedom as layered, embodied, reflective, and contextually responsive. It preserves moral responsibility because responsibility requires reflective engagement and reasons-responsiveness, not exemption from causation. The model aligns with scientific research, legal frameworks, philosophical analysis, and lived experience. Human beings cannot control everything that happens to them. However, they retain the ability to shape how events unfold through interpretive and intentional action.

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