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# The Existential Question of *Free Will*: How Does the *Compatibilist Integration Framework* Reconcile the viewpoints of Daniel C. Dennett and Sam Harris

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*Considering the divergent perspectives of Daniel C. Dennett and Sam Harris, this paper examines the contemporary philosophical debate over the nature of free will. As a compatibilist, Dennett argues that meaningful free will and moral responsibility are compatible with causal determination and depend on human capacities for self-control, rational deliberation, reflective evaluation, and responsiveness to reasons. In contrast, Sam Harris defends an incompatibilist and deterministic position, arguing that human thought, intentions, choices, and actions arise from prior causes beyond conscious control. Consequently, he regards the traditional concept of free will as an illusion. Although Dennett and Harris advocate fundamentally opposite positions regarding the nature of free will, this paper proposes a compatibilist integration framework that reconciles selected elements of their views. This framework incorporates Harris's emphasis on the causal, neurological, and psychological conditions underlying human behavior while retaining Dennett's account of behavioral agency, rational deliberation, and moral responsibility. The framework distinguishes ultimate metaphysical control from meaningful practical agency, arguing that freedom does not require ultimate control over the causes of one's actions but can instead be understood in terms of an agent's capacity to deliberate and act on the basis of reasons. Accordingly, an action can be causally determined while remaining attributable to an agent who deliberates, responds to reasons, and acts in accordance with their values and desires. The paper thus argues for a naturalistic understanding of free will in which causal determination does not necessarily render agency, moral responsibility, or deliberative practices illusory. The proposed framework reconciles these dimensions and provides a nuanced approach to the unending philosophical tension between free will and determinism, thereby contributing to current discussions of moral responsibility, human agency, and autonomy.*

**Keywords**: *Free Will, Personal Responsibility, Morality, Compatibilism, Evolution, Neurobiology*

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## Introduction

The debate over *free will*[1] and determinism has occupied a significant place in psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy (Kane 2002). The central positions in this debate include *determinism*, which maintains that human actions and decisions are causally determined by antecedent conditions and laws of nature; *indeterminism*, which holds that not all events, including human actions, are determined by antecedent conditions; and compatibilism, which maintains that *free will* can coexist with determinism (McKenna & Coates 2021). Significantly, determinism by itself does not entail that *free will* is an *illusion*. Rather, hard determinists maintain that determinism is incompatible with *free will* and that, because determinism is true, *free will* does not exist. By contrast, hard incompatibilists argue that the kind of *free will* required for ultimate moral responsibility is incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism (Hoefer 2023). Daniel C. Dennett adopts a compatibilist position, whereas Sam Harris argues that *free will* is an *illusion* because human actions do not originate in the kind of ultimate self-authorship that the traditional conception of *free will* is commonly taken to require.

The debate between these contrasting positions has major repercussions for moral responsibility, human agency, and legal responsibility. Moreover, research in psychology and neuroscience has enriched this debate by investigating the relationship between conscious decision-making and underlying brain processes (Libet 1985). Thus, the implications of this debate extend across philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, ethics, and law, raising fundamental questions about causation, agency, responsibility, and human autonomy (Kane 2002). Against this background, this article argues that a *compatibilist integration framework* can reconcile key aspects of the disagreement between Dennett's compatibilism and Harris's position. The framework examines whether Harris's account of the causal determination of human cognition and behavior can be accepted while retaining Dennett's compatibilist conception of rational agency, deliberation, meaningful choice, and moral responsibility. In doing so, it seeks to provide a practically viable account of *free will*. This framework also examines whether Harris's deterministic and neuroscientific arguments necessarily entail the rejection of all meaningful forms of *free will*, or whether Dennett's naturalistic conception of agency can be retained without denying the causal conditions emphasized by Harris. To clarify the disagreement between these positions, it is crucial to distinguish free *will* from determinism and to identify the principal positions in the contemporary *free-will* debate. Generally, *free will* may be defined as an agent's capacity to make voluntary choices, deliberate among alternatives, act for reasons, and exercise control over their conduct (McKenna and Pereboom 2016). Traditionally, *free will* has been associated with the ability to do otherwise. Moreover, this traditional conception does not by itself establish that *free will* is incompatible with determinism. Whether the ability to do otherwise requires freedom from causal determination is itself a substantive

[1]"Free will" refers to an individual's capacity to make choices and act intentionally in accordance with their reasons, desires, and judgments. It involves the capacity to exercise meaningful control over one's actions and to act as an agent rather than merely as a passive participant in the processes that shape one's behavior.

philosophical question. Accordingly, this study does not define *free will* in a manner that presupposes incompatibilism; rather, the compatibility or incompatibility of free will and determinism is treated as a question requiring philosophical argument. In contrast, *determinism* as a doctrine primarily concerns the causal structure of events. Causal determinism states that events are determined by antecedent conditions in conjunction with the laws of nature (Hoefer 2023). In the case of human behavior, determinism holds that human actions are causally determined by antecedent factors such as biological, psychological, environmental, and social influences.

Determinism should not be equated with the rejection of *free will*. However, the claim that causal determination eliminates *free will* represents a further philosophical position. Hard determinists and hard incompatibilists maintain that the relevant form of *free will* is incompatible with determinism, whereas compatibilists argue that meaningful *free will* can exist even within a causally determined world (McKenna & Coates 2021). The main positions in the contemporary *free-will* debate can be differentiated according to how they understand the relationship between human freedom, causal determination, and responsibility. However, these positions differ fundamentally over whether human beings can exercise meaningful agency through deliberation, choice, and action within a causally determined world. Libertarianism can be understood as an incompatibilist position, as it maintains that genuine *free will* cannot coexist with determinism. Libertarian accounts hold that if an action is completely determined by antecedent conditions, the agents cannot exercise the kind of control required for genuine freedom. Thus, libertarians defend a conception of agency in which agents possess some form of control that is not fully fixed by prior causes (Strawson 1986). This does not necessarily mean that libertarians simply appeal to randomness. Rather, libertarian theory seeks to explain how agents can exercise genuine control over their actions while denying that those actions are completely determined by prior states of the world. Compatibilism maintains that free will and determinism are compatible. Compatibilists reject the assumption that our actions are determined in a way that necessarily excludes free will. They maintain that *free will* does not require actions to be undetermined or independent of prior conditions; rather, it can be compatible with causal determination when agents can deliberate, respond to reasons, and act in accordance with their values and desires. They instead understand freedom in terms of how an agent performs an action and the capacities that enable the agent to respond to reasons, deliberate, exercise control, and act according to their desires, values, or judgments (McKenna & Coates 2021). From this perspective, an act can have a causal antecedent and still be considered free, as long as it arises from the agent's deliberative and motivational capacities rather than from external coercion. Hard determinism is a form of incompatibilism. It accepts determinism and maintains that, because human actions are determined by prior causes, the kind of *free will* that is normally associated with moral responsibility is impossible (Vihvelin 2022). This perspective posits that factors beyond an individual's control influence their personality, desires, beliefs, aspirations, and circumstances. Incompatibilism is broader than hard determinism. A hard

incompatibilist argues that the kind of *free will* required for ultimate moral responsibility is impossible in both deterministic and indeterministic worlds. If actions are determined by prior causes, the agent lacks the ultimate control required by this conception of free will (Clarke et al. 2021). Conversely, if actions are partly the result of some undetermined or random event, randomness does not give agents more control either (Van Inwagen 2017; Lehrer 1960).

Therefore, both determinism and indeterminism are insufficient to establish the ultimate authorship required by this conception of free will. On the other hand, indeterminism holds that some events are not fully determined by prior conditions and natural laws. Some indeterminist theories about *free will* invoke indeterminism to explain human freedom. Nonetheless, indeterminism does not establish the existence of *free will* by itself. If an action is merely the result of an indeterminate or random event, such an event does not necessarily give the agent greater control over their actions (Hodgson 2002). These distinctions are essential for understanding the philosophical disagreement between Dennett and Harris. The compatibilist Daniel C. Dennett argues that *free will* and determinism can coexist, drawing on the natural processes that have shaped human behavior over evolutionary time. Dennett offers a scientific and evolutionary perspective on *free will* by combining insights from evolutionary theory with compatibilism, the view that free will can coexist with determinism. In an attempt to reconcile *free will* with a deterministic reality, Dennett contends that determinism does not diminish free will but is rather compatible with it. According to Dennett, the evolutionary process has equipped humans with the cognitive abilities necessary for deliberation and judgment, even in a deterministic world (Dennett 2003). Furthermore, the traditional incompatibilist position that determinism inherently precludes *free will* is challenged by this compatibilist approach, which defends the possibility of *free will* in a deterministic world. Dennett's evolutionary approach also emphasizes the role of natural selection in shaping human behavior and judgement. Additionally, he contends that, as organisms evolve, they develop progressively more complex cognitive abilities, such as consciousness and the capacity for deliberation, which contribute to the basis of *free will* (Dennett 2003). Dennett argues that evolutionary pressures have shaped capacities that contribute to human agency and decision-making. Thus, this evolutionary framework provides a biological perspective on the development and significance of *free will*. According to Dennett's two-stage decision-making model[2],*indeterminacy* plays a limited role in generating alternative considerations rather than in determining the final choice. In the first stage, a "consideration generator" produces alternative considerations that are, to some degree, undetermined. In the second stage, the agent considers these alternatives, evaluates them, and makes a choice based on

[2]Dennett proposed a two-stage model of decision-making in which a degree of *indeterminacy* is introduced at the stage of generating alternative considerations, followed by a process of rational deliberation and selection. In the first stage, a consideration-generator produces several possible considerations without fixing a particular outcome in advance. In the second stage, the agent evaluates the relevant considerations through reasoning, drawing on beliefs, values, and other reasons, and these considerations contribute to the eventual decision. Thus, Dennett places indeterminacy in the generation of alternatives rather than in the final act of choice itself (Dennett 1978).

their reasons and beliefs, although other factors may also influence the decision (Dennett 1978, pp. 295, 316).

Thus, *indeterminacy* in Dennett's model concerns the generation of alternatives rather than the final decision itself. This does not make Dennett a libertarian or conflict with his compatibilist position, because the final choice remains connected to the agent's reasoning and deliberation. Thus, the two-stage model allows for some *indeterminacy* in generating alternatives while preserving a meaningful connection between the alternatives considered, the agent's reasons, and the choice that is ultimately made. Finally, Dennett emphasizes how important empirical evidence and scientific study are for understanding *free will*. He argues that discussions of *free will* should take account of scientific findings from fields such as neuroscience, cognitive science, and evolutionary biology. This scientific approach promotes interdisciplinary collaboration between philosophy and the sciences and encourages philosophers to engage with empirical evidence. Dennett grounds the study of *free will* in scientific evidence; his approach offers an empirically informed understanding of the concept. In general, Dennett's evolutionary account of compatibilism contributes a nuanced perspective to contemporary debates about the relationship between determinism and *free will*. This perspective draws on evolutionary theory, acknowledges the role of indeterminacy, and emphasizes the importance of empirical evidence. Conversely, Sam Harris advocates a strong incompatibilist stance, drawing on determinism and neuroscientific findings to argue that the traditional concept of free will is an *illusion* (Harris 2012). Harris therefore rejects *free will* understood as ultimate authorship or control over one's thoughts and actions, and he rejects the compatibilist understanding of *free will*. Harris maintains that individuals are not the ultimate authors of their own wills. Thoughts and intentions arise from unconscious processes that lie beyond our conscious control. As Harris states, "The freedom we often overlook is not truly ours" (Harris 2012, p. 31). He further observes, "Since it is impossible to make free will intellectually coherent, it is more than just an *illusion*—or less" (Harris 2012, p. 31). Harris argues that our wills are either the result of chance, for which we cannot claim responsibility, or determined by prior causes for which we are not responsible (Harris 2012, p. 32). Causal determinism holds that future events, including human decisions and actions, are determined by prior conditions together with the laws of nature (Werndl 2016). Consequently, an individual's initial circumstances influence their subsequent decisions and actions. Because individuals do not choose their initial circumstances, Harris argues that they cannot be regarded as the ultimate authors of all the factors that shape their subsequent decisions. Thus, Harris argues that determinism is incompatible with the kind of *free will* that requires ultimate authorship of one's thoughts and actions. As he states,

> Take a moment to think the context in which your next decision will occur. You did not pick your parents or the time and place of your birth. You did not choose your gender or most of your life experiences. You had no control whatsoever over your genome or the development of your brain. In addition, now your brain is making choices based on preferences and beliefs that have been hammered into it over a lifetime—by your genes, your physical development since the moment you

> were conceived, and the interactions you have had with other people, events, and ideas. Where is the freedom in this? (Harris 2012, p. 32).

Harris argues that the type of *free will* necessary to support ultimate desert-based responsibility cannot exist in a deterministic universe. To support his incompatibilist claim, he draws on the empirical research of Benjamin Libet and other neuroscientists (Libet 1985). Harris uses the choice between tea and coffee as an example in his discussion of free will. He argues that, although he chose coffee that morning, the intention to make that choice does not originate in conscious awareness; rather, the intention enters consciousness alongside any competing idea or urge (Harris 2012). He uses research by Benjamin Libet[3] and others to support this claim, arguing that *unconscious brain processes*[4] can precede conscious awareness of intentions and influence human decision-making. These distinctions are essential to understanding the disagreement between Dennett and Harris. Harris relies on Libet's experiments to argue that neural activity can precede conscious awareness of an intention to act. The implications of this finding depend on how *free will* is understood. If *free will* necessitates independence from prior causes, one could interpret Libet's findings as supporting Harris's incompatibilist position. However, a compatibilist may argue that prior neural activity does not eliminate agency or responsibility. Actions may remain attributable to individuals when they arise from their reasons, values, deliberative capacities, and decision-making processes. Thus, unconscious neural activity preceding conscious awareness does not by itself settle the free-will debate, but it challenges the assumption that consciousness is necessarily the starting point of action.

The paper therefore examines Harris's interpretation of Libet's findings. In this context, the *compatibilist integration framework* proposed in this paper distinguishes between ultimate causal authorship and meaningful practical agency. Ultimate causal authorship refers to being the independent ultimate originator of one's actions, whereas meaningful practical agency refers to exercising control over one's actions through deliberation, reason-responsiveness, consideration of alternatives, and reflective self-control. While accepting Harris's determinism, the framework retains Dennett's naturalistic account of rational agency. This does not make Harris a compatibilist, nor does it change his position on the lack of ultimate self-authorship. Rather, it raises the question of whether the denial of ultimate control necessarily entails the denial of human agency altogether. This paper argues

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[3]See Libet B, Gleason CA, Wright EW, and Pearl DK (1983) Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral activity (readiness-potential): The unconscious initiation of a freely voluntary act. *Brain* 106(3): 623–642. https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/106.3.623; Libet B (1985) Unconscious cerebral initiative and the role of conscious will in voluntary action. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8(4):529–566. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00044903

[4]The term "*unconscious brain processes*" describes neuronal activity that takes place in the brain without conscious awareness. These mechanisms frequently affect perception, emotion, and decision-making, among other facets of human behavior. To better understand how unconscious brain processes influence behavior and cognition, researchers investigate these processes, which advance our knowledge of human consciousness and agency.

that denying ultimate control does not necessarily entail denying human agency altogether. In important respects, the proposed framework can reconcile Harris's account of causal and neuroscientific determinism with Dennett's emphasis on deliberation, reasons-responsiveness, self-control, and accountability. The framework does not claim that their theories of *free will* are identical; instead, it integrates Harris's emphasis on causal determination with Dennett's argument that meaningful human agency remains possible within a causally determined world. The paper is structured in seven sections. First, it outlines the central problem. Second, it explores Dennett's account of compatibilist freedom. Third, it examines Harris's deterministic and neuroscientific challenge. Fourth, it critically assesses their philosophical disagreement. Fifth, it formulates a compatibilist response to Harris. Sixth, it develops the proposed compatibilist integration framework. Finally, it summarizes the main argument and considers its implications for human agency and moral responsibility.

## Delving into Dennett's *Compatibilistic* Understanding of *Free Will*

According to Dennett, *evolutionary processes*[5] shape *free will* as an emergent reality. He contends that the human ability to reason and make rational decisions evolved to enable human beings to survive in complex social environments and adapt to changing circumstances (Dennett 2003). Dennett's philosophy questions traditional theories of *free will* and encourages multidisciplinary inquiry and a complex conception of moral obligation. According to his theory of evolutionary compatibilism, human freedom—which is a byproduct of *biological selection*[6]—can exist in a predetermined universe. Psychological factors such as desire, purpose, and belief greatly influence our judgments and are relevant to moral responsibility and free will. Drawing on a Neo-Darwinian[7] perspective, Dennett's "historical" and "perspectival" *evolutionary* approach provides an "emergentist" and "interactivist" account of free will that aims to dispel what he regards as a metaphysical misconception about "*free will*." Dennett provides a *naturalistic* account of freedom in his works "*Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and Meanings of Life*" (1995) and "*Freedom Evolves*" (2003). These works address the question of how an evolutionary

[5]The term "*evolutionary process*" describes how natural selection and genetic diversity contribute to gradual changes in organisms over many generations. According to Dennett's argument, human cognition and conduct have changed over time as a result of environmental challenges that have shaped our thought processes and behavioral patterns. This demonstrates how evolutionary biology affects human behavior and psychology.

[6]*Biological selection* is the process by which advantageous traits spread through a population over generations. Dennett suggests that human freedom is an evolutionary byproduct of this process, indicating that our capacity for agency has developed as a beneficial trait. This perspective highlights the compatibility of *free will* with determinism through the lens of *natural selection*.

[7]Neo-Darwinian philosophy, which stresses *natural selection* as the primary driver of *biological evolution*, has had a major influence on Dennett's evolutionary theory of *free will*. This viewpoint is consistent with Dennett's assertion that a more cogent and empirically supported explanation for human agency can be obtained by viewing free will through an evolutionary lens.

perspective can explain everything from unconscious atoms to freely chosen action. In this *naturalistic* account of freedom, simple cells evolved into increasingly complex organisms, including multicellular organisms, contributing to the emergence of the complex macroscopic environment in which we live and function (Dennett 2003). Dennett states,

> Free will does exist, but rather than freedom being an eternal, unchanging condition of our existence, in reality, he reveals, it has evolved, just like life on planet Earth and the air we breathe. (Dennett 2003, p. 10)

Dennett contends that, in a world governed by causality, *free will* is an emergent characteristic that arises through evolutionary processes. Through biological and cultural evolution, human beings have developed capacities for voluntary control, decision-making, and responsiveness to reasons. This set of capacities is associated with "*free will*." These evolving human capacities have contributed to the development of our ability to exercise free will (Dennett 2003). Dennett argues that *free will* is desirable and stems from capacities shaped by genetic and cultural evolution. He stresses the unique abilities of individuals as free agents and says that *evolution*[8] is important for understanding free will. Until recently, *free will* did not exist on Earth. Over billions of years, biological evolution has gradually increased the capacities of living organisms for flexible and effective control. As evolutionary capacities developed from simpler forms of life to increasingly complex organisms, they eventually contributed to the emergence of human agency and the moral challenges of social life. According to Dennett, the ability to adapt, anticipate outcomes, and exercise flexible control in response to impulses and perceptions constitutes *free will*. He emphasizes how the development of human culture contributed to the emergence of our minds, worldviews, moral dilemmas, and capacities for *free will*. Dennett further challenges the idea put forth by sceptics that "free will is an illusion," outlining the historical development of voluntary control guided by reason. Dennett uses this argument as evidence to refute the assertion.

> Human freedom is not an *illusion*; it is an objective phenomenon. Human freedom is real—as real as language, music, and money—so it can be studied objectively from a no-nonsense, scientific perspective. However, our beliefs about it influence its persistence, just as they do for language, music, money, and other societal products. (Dennett 2003, p. 305)

Dennett argues that human *free will* is grounded in our actual capacities for deliberation, decision-making, and rational choice rather than in metaphysical notions of freedom, and therefore should not be regarded as an *illusion*. He states:

> No, free will is not an *illusion*; all the varieties of free will worth wanting are or can be ours, but you have to give up a bit of false and outdated ideology to understand how

[8]Dennett links *free will* to a naturalistic understanding of behavior, highlighting how evolution has shaped human agency. He seeks to challenge traditional metaphysical views by grounding free will in empirical data. However, despite the insights from evolutionary theory, questions remain about its ability to fully explain human consciousness and decision-making.

> this can be so. Romantic love, minus Cupid's arrow, is still worth yearning for. It is still, indeed, romantic love—real romantic love. (Dennett 2003, pp. 224–225)

Dennett contends that the form of *free will*, shaped over extended periods of biological and cultural selection, comprises our abilities to act, anticipate, and exercise control—all of which are based on our capacity to understand and weigh our options. He argues that making decisions is an essential component of the causal web rather than an *illusion* or a causally inert *epiphenomenon*[9]. According to Dennett, our capacity to act in accordance with desires shaped by biological and cultural evolution constitutes meaningful freedom, and metaphysical possibilities are irrelevant to our practical perspective on freedom. He argues that determinism is compatible with evolutionary freedom and does not compromise human agency, thereby defending a deterministic conception of *free will*. Even in a deterministic universe, individuals can regulate their actions and make meaningful judgements. Dennett emphasizes that understanding our *evolutionary* history, which has contributed to our capacities to avoid danger and adjust to changing circumstances, is essential to comprehending human agency in a deterministic universe. Dennett's compatibilist account of *free will* is both scientifically informed and conceptually grounded. His *naturalistic* approach draws on evolutionary biology, neuroscience, psychology, cognitive science, and related disciplines to understand human beings as evolved biological and cognitive organisms with capacities for deliberation, self-control, reflection, and behavioral regulation (Dennett 1984; Dennett, 2003). At the same time, these scientific considerations are part of a broader philosophical inquiry into the nature of *free will* and the conditions required for meaningful agency and moral responsibility. Dennett challenges the assumption that *free will* requires an agent to be causally independent, ultimately self-originating, or metaphysically unconditioned. Instead, he argues that the forms of freedom that matter to human agency can be understood within a *naturalistic* and causal framework (Dennett 1984; Dennett 2003). Dennett's account integrates these empirical and conceptual dimensions. Scientific knowledge elucidates the development and functioning of the capacities that underpin human agency, whereas conceptual analysis investigates whether the presence of causal antecedents is adequate to negate freedom. For Dennett, the important question is therefore not simply whether human actions have causes, but whether human beings possess the capacities to deliberate, respond to reasons, anticipate consequences, exercise self-control, and modify their behavior accordingly (Dennett 2003). Thus, Dennett does not merely dismiss the problem of determinism; rather, he challenges the inference that causal determination necessarily eliminates meaningful agency. His compatibilist position is consequently informed by scientific understanding while also depending on a philosophical analysis of what constitutes freedom, agency, and responsibility. Dennett uses the term

[9]A thing is said to be a causal *epiphenomenon* if it emerges as a result of underlying causal processes without actively influencing those processes. It implies that, with regard to decision making, our conscious choices can be seen as mere epiphenomena, having no real causal power to influence behavior.

"evitability"[10] in contrast to "inevitability"[11] which he defines as an agent's capacity to foresee possible outcomes and take action to avert undesirable outcomes (Dennett 2003). According to Dennett, compatibilistic freedom depends on our evolutionary background and ability to make conscious decisions. Consequently, we have developed capacities for moral awareness, empathy, and self-reflection. In a deterministic universe, Dennett rejects the notion of ultimate, self-originating responsibility, but he holds that individuals can remain morally responsible for their decisions when they possess practical freedom.

Moral responsibility is shaped by socio-cultural norms and practices, including reward and punishment, which are often grounded in the assumption that individuals possess free will and are accountable for their actions. In this way, morality and freedom have developed through cultural evolution building on biological evolution. According to Dennett, human *free will* can be meaningful only in the "compatibilistic kind,"[12]. This interpretation of *free will* recognizes an agent's ability to understand their place in a world of causes and effects. Thus, when we say an agent could have acted differently, we mean that, if the agent's relevant causal conditions had been altered, the agent's actions and their outcomes would have been different (Gomes, 1999, pp. 59-76). Dennett developed the concept of "degrees of freedom"[13] to explain the variety and complexity of human decision-making within deterministic systems. He uses this concept to clarify that individuals have choices and options available to them, even though other forces may affect their decisions. These degrees of freedom represent different levels of flexibility in decision-making. According to Dennett, individuals are not predestined, even in the face of a deterministic worldview in which events are causally decided. They are capable of making choices and exerting some degree of control. According to his theory, the human mind is a complex system with various pathways and options for action. Individuals can still assess possibilities, consider alternatives, and make decisions based on their desires and preferences, even when their reasoning and decision-making are influenced by internal and external factors, such as biological impulses, cultural norms, and environmental stimuli. Dennett stresses the need to understand degrees of freedom in deterministic systems. He knows that even though an individual may not have full freedom, they still have some control over their surroundings. According to this theory, an individual can

[10]Dennett defined "evitability" as an agent's ability to anticipate foreseeable consequences and take action to prevent undesirable outcomes. It implies that individual have the power to actively shape and change what happens in the future by making decisions and choices that will hopefully avoid unfavorable outcomes.

[11]Dennett characterizes "inevitability" as the incapacity of an agent to anticipate and avert foreseeable outcomes. In other cases, it emphasizes a sense of determinism or predestination, suggesting a lack of control or influence over future occurrences.

[12]In this sense, a view of *free will* that is compatible with determinism is referred to as a "compatibilistic kind." According to Dennett, this idea of *free will*—which is consistent with the deterministic workings of the natural world—is the only kind of free will that has any significance or value for individual.

[13]In Dennett's framework, "degrees of freedom" refer to the range of choices individuals have within deterministic systems. Despite various deterministic influences, individual retain some ability to choose their actions, highlighting the nuanced interplay between determinism and human agency.

exercise agency by making decisions from a range of possibilities based on their values and beliefs. Despite Dennett's arguments, opponents such as Ted Honderich and Galen Strawson contest his compatibilist position, claiming that determinism restricts genuine autonomy (Strawson 1986, Honderich 1993).

Philosophers such as Derk Pereboom and Saul Smilansky argue that Dennett's emphasis on degrees of freedom and evolutionary roots does not adequately address the deterministic mechanisms that underlie human behavior, raising the possibility that perceived control is *illusory* (Smilansky 2000, Pereboom 2001). Although Dennett defends a compatibilist account of *free will* and moral responsibility, philosophers such as Derk Pereboom and Galen Strawson challenge the adequacy of compatibilist approaches to moral responsibility. They raise questions about justice and punishment by arguing that, if human behavior is influenced by factors beyond an individual's ultimate control, then no one can be entirely deserving of praise or blame (Smilansky 2000, Pereboom 2001). In response, Dennett adopts a compatibilist stance, emphasising moral agency and reason-guided deliberation while acknowledging the complexity of human decision-making and the influence of cultural norms and legal frameworks. His perspective has influenced contemporary discussions and encouraged further research into human agency, particularly the cognitive processes and evolutionary roots of decision-making. Although Dennett's account may not resolve every question, it advances our understanding of the philosophical and scientific dimensions of *free will*.

## Unraveling Sam Harris's Neuro-Scientific Perspective on *Free Will*

Sam Harris's perspective on *free will* is grounded in his account of determinism and its implications for human agency. Drawing on neuroscientific findings, Harris argues that neurobiological and psychological factors determine human behavior and influence human decision-making. In his book '*Free Will*' (2012), Harris argues that *free will*, as commonly understood, is an *illusion* because we are not the ultimate authors of our thoughts and actions. Sam Harris writes:

> Free will is an illusion. Our wills are not simply our own making. We don't know the causes of our thoughts and intentions, and we can't control them. We do not have the freedom we think we have. Free will is more than an illusion (or less) in that it cannot be made conceptually coherent. Either our wills are determined by prior causes and we are not responsible for them, or they are the product of chance and we are not responsible for them. (Harris 2012, p. 5)

The above statement suggests that our sense of agency and control over our actions are misleading and provides a strong argument against *free will*. Harris argues that our thoughts and intentions arise from underlying causes that operate beyond our conscious control and awareness. Consequently, our decisions arise from deterministic processes or chance events, neither of which appears to provide the kind of ultimate control required for *free will* in Harris's account. In this sense, our wills are not entirely our own, because we do not ultimately control the causes that shape them. This argument highlights the alleged

conceptual incoherence of *free will*. Harris argues that the traditional conception of *free will* is untenable because it requires a form of control that cannot be reconciled with the causal processes underlying our thoughts and actions. Further, Harris goes on to say that if prior causes determine our actions, we cannot be ultimately responsible for them, since we do not control those causes. Similarly, if our actions result from chance, we cannot claim ultimate responsibility for them, because chance is also beyond our control. For example, we can understand a man's decision to shoot the president in relation to the neural processes that underlie his decision-making. This neural activity is influenced by multiple factors, including upbringing, genetics, and chance events, illustrating Harris's argument that our actions are shaped by processes beyond our conscious control. (Harris 2012). In such a situation, the idea of *free will* becomes untenable within Harris's framework, since the ultimate control required for *free will* appears to be absent. Therefore, Harris concludes that *free will*, understood as the ultimate authorship of our thoughts and actions, cannot be justified, and it's fundamentally untenable. Furthermore, Harris argues that no coherent account explains how mental and physical processes could generate the kind of *free will* that he rejects. Finally, Harris challenges the traditional conception of *free will*, according to which individuals possess the capacity to choose or act otherwise under the same conditions. Harris argues that human choices and actions are causally determined by factors beyond conscious control and that, consequently, the subjective experience of *free will* is deceptive. His position rests on the view that neurobiological processes, operating through causal mechanisms, shape and determine human decisions and behavior. By adopting a deterministic perspective, Harris challenges the traditional understanding of human agency, emphasizing the influence of psychological factors, genetic predispositions, environmental conditions, and prior experiences on decision-making. Harris's stance reinforces the notion that our decisions are not free but are instead the products of deterministic processes, challenging the traditional concept of agency and encouraging a reappraisal of the philosophical understanding of *free will*. Harris further contends that the subjective feeling of exercising *free will* does not accurately reflect the underlying mechanisms of human behavior but instead emerges from neural processes that operate beyond conscious awareness (Harris 2012). According to Harris, the human brain constructs a narrative of *free will* that enables individuals to interpret their actions as the outcomes of conscious deliberation and intentional choice. Harris's assertion draws on neuroscientific findings showing that the human brain is continuously involved in the complex processes of cognition, perception, and decision-making (Harris 2012). Many of the processes underlying human decision-making operate beyond conscious awareness and may influence actions before individuals become aware of their decisions. From this perspective, it can be argued that our sense of control and agency is not evidence of *free will* but rather an *illusion* created by the brain.

This narrative contributes to a coherent sense of self and agency, enabling individuals to understand themselves as conscious agents who exercise control over their decisions (Harris 2012). Nonetheless, Harris argues that this subjective narrative does not establish the existence of *free will* because the processes underlying decision-making are shaped by antecedent causes, many of which

remain inaccessible to conscious awareness. Rather, Harris proposes that there are a large number of elements that include genetic tendencies, environmental influences, and past experiences, all of which shape our behavior in predictable ways. Consequently, the subjective impression of making unconstrained choices does not, in Harris's view, demonstrate that individuals possess *free will* in the traditional sense. Recognizing the causal influences underlying human behavior, Harris suggests, may lead to a more nuanced understanding of human decision-making, responsibility, and self-understanding. While the experience of *free will* may be deeply rooted in human consciousness, Harris argues that it is an *illusion* arising from the brain's cognitive processes rather than a genuine reflection of autonomous agency. Harris's argument against *free will* draws substantially on neuroscientific evidence concerning human decision-making. Harris draws on the influential experiments of American neuroscientist Benjamin Libet, whose findings suggest that neural activity associated with voluntary movement begins before participants report consciously deciding to move (Libet 1985). Harris discusses neuroscientific studies investigating the neural correlates of decision-making and the influence of unconscious processes on human behavior. These neuroscientific findings support Harris's argument that processes operating beyond conscious awareness influence human actions. In his influential experiments, physiologist Benjamin Libet used electroencephalography (EEG) to investigate the timing of neural activity associated with voluntary movement. His findings indicated that the *readiness potential*, an electrical signal associated with motor preparation, began approximately 550 milliseconds before the reported onset of the conscious intention to move, which occurred roughly 200 milliseconds before movement (Libet 1985). Building on questions raised by Libet's findings, Soon and colleagues used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)[14] to investigate the neural processes associated with voluntary decisions (Soon et al. 2008). In the experiment, participants were instructed to make simple motor decisions, such as pressing a button, while observing a stream of letters presented on a screen. The researchers found that patterns of activity in certain brain regions contained information that could predict participants' eventual choices approximately 7–10 seconds before they reported becoming consciously aware of their decisions (Soon et al. 2008).

Other research using direct cortical recordings has investigated whether neural activity can predict voluntary movements before participants become consciously aware of their intentions. Fried, Mukamel, and Kreiman's (2011) findings suggest that the activity of 256 neurons in the supplementary motor area could predict an impending movement with over 80% accuracy, approximately 700 milliseconds before participants reported becoming aware of their intention to move. These findings suggest that neural processes associated with voluntary actions may begin before conscious awareness. Harris draws on such findings to question whether individuals consciously initiate their actions or merely become aware of decisions influenced by preceding brain activity. As Harris argues, these

[14]Functional magnetic resonance imaging is referred to as fMRI. By identifying variations in blood flow and oxygenation levels in response to neuronal activity, this neuroimaging approach maps and measures brain activity.

findings are difficult to reconcile with the sense that we are the *conscious* authors of our actions. He writes, "One fact is clear: before you know what, you'll do next—when you seem to have complete freedom to act—your brain has already decided. You then become conscious of this 'decision' and believe that you are in the process of making it" (Harris 2012, pp. 16–17). However, these results do not prove that *free will* is an *illusion* or that conscious control has no role in decision-making. Rather, they highlight the complex relationship between unconscious neural processes and conscious intention. These results challenge the traditional belief that conscious intention invariably precedes in voluntary action. Neuroscientific findings suggest that neural processes may contribute to decision-making before individuals consciously experience the intention to act, despite their subjective sense of freedom and autonomy. Harris uses this line of reasoning to question the distinction between conscious and unconscious processes, challenging the assumption that conscious awareness independently initiates actions while unconscious neural mechanisms merely execute them. Although mental states are associated with corresponding brain states, Harris argues that individuals do not consciously choose the intentions that arise in their minds before becoming aware of them. The emergence of mental states beyond conscious control raises fundamental questions about the nature of *free will* and the extent to which individuals exercise agency in decision-making. Harris argues that neuroscientific findings challenge traditional conceptions of free will by suggesting that human thoughts, intentions, and actions are shaped by neurobiological and psychological processes that operate partly beyond conscious control. From this perspective, the subjective experience of being the autonomous author of one's actions is largely *illusory*.

Harris's position has been criticized for its implications for moral responsibility and the nature of human agency. Critics argue that Harris's rejection of traditional *free will* raises questions about the justification of moral responsibility, particularly if individuals lack ultimate control over the causes of their actions (Dennett 2017). Harris, however, maintains that rejecting traditional *free will* does not eliminate the practical or social significance of moral responsibility. Individuals remain subject to social norms, legal sanctions, and the consequences of their actions, even if they lack ultimate control over the causes of their behavior. Critics such as Alfred Mele also question the account of *free will* that may oversimplify the relationship between conscious intention, unconscious processes, and human agency (Mele 2006). Harris nevertheless argues that recognizing the limitations of traditional *free will* can foster greater compassion by emphasizing the influence of factors beyond an individual's control. His position therefore connects philosophical debates about *free will* with neuroscientific accounts of human behavior, challenging traditional conceptions of agency and moral responsibility. Critics argue that rejecting *free will* may encourage *fatalism*[15] and undermine moral responsibility, whereas

[15]The term "fatalism" here refers to the conviction that everything, including human behavior, is predestined and unavoidable, independent of free will or effort on the part of the individual. It conveys a feeling of surrender or acceptance of one's lot in life, along with the conviction that results are set in stone and cannot be changed.

Harris maintains that recognizing the causal influences underlying human behavior can foster compassion and empathy. Overall, Harris presents determinism as an account of human behavior informed by neuroscientific research, although the broader philosophical implications of this research for *free will* remain contested

## The Intellectual Rivalry: An In-Depth Assessment

Although both acknowledge that psychological, biological, and environmental factors shape decision-making, Dennett and Harris hold significantly different views on human agency. Their central disagreement concerns whether meaningful human agency can coexist with determinism. Dennett argues that humans can make meaningful decisions and exercise agency in a deterministic world, emphasizing the evolutionary development of "degrees of freedom" (Dennett 1984). Harris, by contrast, regards *free will* as an *illusion*, arguing that human thoughts and actions arise from prior neurobiological and psychological causes over which individuals have no ultimate control (Harris 2012). These differences provide the context for examining Dennett's direct engagement with Harris in his 2017 paper, *Reflections on Free Will: A Review of Sam Harris's book 'Free Will'* (2012), which provides a useful basis for identifying their points of convergence and divergence.

## Points of Convergence

Dennett and Harris share several philosophical commitments, particularly concerning determinism and the rejection of libertarian *free will*. These shared commitments provide a basis for comparing their accounts of human agency, despite their divergent conclusions about free will. The following subsections examine these points of convergence in greater detail:

## Rejection of Libertarian *Free Will*

Dennett and Harris reject the view that genuine freedom requires choices to be wholly independent of antecedent causes or to originate from a nonphysical or contra-causal source. Dennett argues that rejecting libertarian *free will* does not require abandoning *free will* altogether; instead he develops a *naturalistic* account of freedom compatible with causal determination (Dennett 2003, 2017). Harris likewise rejects the traditional conception of *free will*, particularly the idea that individuals are the ultimate authors of their thoughts and actions. According to Harris, thoughts, intentions, and choices arise from prior causes that individuals do not ultimately control (Harris 2012). Thus, the two philosophers converge in rejecting libertarian or contra-causal freedom. Their disagreement concerns the implications of rejecting libertarian free will for human agency and moral responsibility.

## Naturalism

Both philosophers adopt a *naturalism*[16] approach to human thought and behavior, explaining cognition and action without appealing to divine or supernatural force. Dennett draws on evolutionary biology and cognitive science to explain the development of capacities such as deliberation, rationality, agency, and intentionality (Dennett 2003, 2017). Harris, by contrast, put greater emphasis on neuroscience, arguing that human thoughts, decisions, and intentions arise from brain processes (Harris 2012). Thus, both philosophers adopt a *naturalism* account of human behaviors, although, their views on *free will* differ significantly. Dennett uses a *naturalistic* approach to defend compatibilism, whereas Harris draws on causal and neuroscientific considerations to challenge traditional conceptions of *free will*.

## Acceptance of Determinism

Dennett and Harris agree that human thought, decision-making, and behavior occur within the physical world and are subject to causal influences. Their disagreement does not primarily concern whether human behavior has causal determinants. Harris adopts an incompatibilist position, arguing that causal determination is incompatible with free will understood as ultimate authorship or control over one's actions. Dennett, by contrast, maintains that determinism does not preclude meaningful agency or moral responsibility (Dennett 2017, Harris 2012). Thus, although both philosophers recognize the significance of causal determination, they reach sharply different conclusions about the possibility of *free will*.

## The Causal Embeddedness of Human Decision-Making

Both Dennett and Harris acknowledge that decision-making is shaped by biological, psychological, neural, environmental, and social factors (Dennett 2017, Harris 2012). Harris emphasizes that thoughts, intentions, and decisions arise from prior causes that individuals do not ultimately control. Dennett likewise accepts that human choices are causally conditioned but argues that these very causal processes help develop and sustain the capacities through which individuals deliberate, act, and exercise moral responsibility. Thus, both reject the idea that human decision-making is independent of causal influences, but they disagree about what those influences imply for *free will*. Harris regards this causal dependence as incompatible with *free will* understood as ultimate authorship, whereas Dennett considers it compatible with meaningful agency and moral responsibility. Taken together, these points reveal several important

[16]Within this framework, '*naturalism*' is the belief that all phenomena, including human behaviour and consciousness, can be explained by natural laws, without invoking supernatural, or metaphysical justifications. It emphasizes empirical data and scientific inquiry to understand the universe, shaping Dennett's and Harris's views on responsibility and free will in relation to humana actions.

commitments shared by Dennett and Harris. Both dismiss libertarian or contra-causal free will, embrace a broadly naturalistic perspective on human action, acknowledge the causal determinants of human behavior, and take scientific explanations of cognition and decision-making with seriously (Dennett 2003, 2017, Harris 2012). However, Harris's rejection of libertarian *free will* should not be mistaken for compatibilism. Harris argues that the ordinary conception of *free will* is misguided because individuals do not ultimately originate or control the thoughts and actions that arise in their minds (Harris 2012). His position is therefore incompatibilist: he rejects the idea that individuals possess ultimate authorship or control over their thoughts and actions. By contrast, Dennett maintains that *free will* and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism (Dennett 2003, 2017). Thus, their common ground lies in their broadly *naturalistic* approach and their recognition that human decision-making is causally conditioned; it does not extend to their opposing accounts of *free will*.

## Points of Divergence

The main points of divergence between Dennett and Harris concern their interpretations of free will and determinism, reflecting fundamental disagreements about human agency and moral responsibility. The following subsections examine their principal disagreement.

## Compatibilism vs. Incompatibilism

Dennett defends compatibilism[17] arguing that *free will* is compatible with the causal determination of human behavior (Dennett 2017). For Dennett, individuals can act freely when their actions arise from their own capacities for reasoning, deliberation, intention, and self-control. By contrast, Harris adopts an incompatibilist stance[18] arguing that causal determination is incompatible with *free will* understood as ultimate authorship or control over one's actions (Harris 2012). Dennett therefore criticizes Harris for rejecting the possibility of meaningful agency within a causally determined world (Dennett 2017).

[17]Dennett's compatibilism posits that *free will* and determinism can coexist. He argues that individuals can possess meaningful *free will* even in a deterministic universe, where events are predetermined. For Dennett, free will is defined by the ability to make decisions aligned with one's goals, values, and desires, regardless of prior causal influences.

[18]The idea that *free will* and determinism are essentially irreconcilable is known as Sam Harris's incompatibilistic stance. According to Harris, *free will*—which is defined as the capacity to make a different choice in a particular circumstance—cannot exist if determinism is true and all events, including human actions, are causally determined by earlier events.

**Disagreement on Free Will**:

Harris argues that the idea that humans have *free will* is nothing but an *illusion*, illustrating his position through the case of Charles Whitman, whose behavior was reportedly affected by a brain tumor. Harris draws on neuroscience to argue that human thoughts and actions arise from antecedent causes that individuals do not ultimately control, thereby challenging the traditional conception of *free will* (Harris 2012). Dennett acknowledges cases such as Whitman's but rejects Harris's conclusion that they establish the *illusory* nature of free will. Dennett argues that neurological impairments may restrict an individual's capacity for deliberation and self-control without establishing that all human agency is *illusory*. Dennett's response should therefore be understood as a challenge to the interpretation of neuroscientific evidence, rather than as a rejection of neuroscience itself (Dennett 2017).

**Responsibility and Control**

Harris believes that in a deterministic universe, individuals do not have control over their actions, as everything is predetermined by prior causes. In contrast, Dennett argues that human beings can exercise meaningful control over their actions (Dennett 2017). He maintains that individuals can deliberate, reflect on their choices, and exercise self-control even though their decisions are influenced by prior events.

**Influence of Desires**

Harris argues that in a deterministic universe, an individual's desires are shaped by prior events that are beyond their control, which raises questions about whether they can be considered the ultimate authors of their own motivations. Dennett challenges this position by emphasizing that introspection, education, and conscious effort can enable individuals to modify their desires (Dennett 2017). Dennett further argues that Harris underestimates the role of deliberation and choice in shaping desires, intentions, and subsequent behavior.

**Nature of Authorship**

Harris uses the puppet analogy to illustrate his argument that human thoughts and actions arise from prior causes that individuals do not ultimately control. Dennett criticizes this analogy for oversimplifying the relationship between human agency and causal determinism. Dennett argues that, although human behavior is influenced by prior events, individuals can still exercise meaningful control over their actions. The puppet analogy, he contends, fails to capture the capacities for deliberation and self-regulation that underpin his account of *free will* and moral responsibility (Dennett 2017).

## Moral Responsibility and Self-Improvement

Another point of divergence concerns how determinism affects moral responsibility and personal change. Although Harris maintains that rejecting *free will* does not require abandoning social or moral practices, he argues that human behavior is determined by forces that cannot be controlled (Harris 2012). Dennett, by contrast, emphasizes the practical significance of moral responsibility, arguing that individuals can learn from experience, reflect on their actions, improve their behavior, and exercise self-control within a deterministic framework (Dennett 2017). Dennett therefore argues that determinism is compatible with moral accountability and personal development, whereas Harris rejects the idea that individuals are the ultimate authors of their thoughts and actions. Although Dennett presents substantial criticisms of Harris's position on *free will*, Harris responds to these objections in his 2014 paper, "*The Marionette's Lament: A Response to Daniel Dennett*." In this response, Harris identifies several points of disagreement that he believes Dennett has not adequately addressed. First, Harris challenges Dennett's interpretation of J. L. Austin's missed-putt example.[19] Harris argues that Dennett's interpretation of the missed-putt example supports his compatibilistic account of free will. Harris, by contrast, contends that the example raises a challenge for compatibilism and supports an incompatibilist understanding of free will, according to which *free will* cannot coexist with determinism. Harris maintains that the example has broader philosophical implications for the nature of *free will* than its practical consequences alone might suggest. Harris therefore argues that Dennett's position does not adequately address the deeper philosophical questions raised by determinism and the traditional conception of *free will*. Second, Harris distinguishes between general capacities and particular actions. He distinguishes two meanings of "could" by referring to an individual's general capacity to perform an action and the possibility of performing a particular action under specific circumstances. According to Harris, it may be reasonable to assess an individual's general capacities, but assigning responsibility for a particular action remains philosophically problematic if that action results from prior causes beyond the individual's ultimate control (Harris 2014). Thirdly, Harris addresses Dennett's concerns about the practical implications of incompatibilism. Harris contends that these practical concerns do not undermine his incompatibilist position and maintains that he is equally committed to protecting society from criminal behavior. Harris therefore maintains that public safety and practical management of harmful behavior do not require accepting traditional conceptions of *free will* (Harris 2014). Fourth, Harris revisits J. L. Austin's missed-putt example to question whether an individual could genuinely have acted otherwise under the same antecedent conditions (Austin 1961, Harris 2014). Harris argues that the circumstances surrounding the putt, including Austin's state of mind, contributed causally to its outcome. Harris argues that claiming

[19]Austin used the example of a missed putt to describe a situation that is frequently discussed in philosophical discourse to highlight ideas about moral responsibility and free will. Austin gives the following scenario of a golfer who tries to make a putt but misses it. The situation raises the question of whether the golfer should be held morally accountable for missing the putt and whether he might have acted differently under the given circumstances.

Austin could have acted differently does not, by itself, establish that the antecedent conditions could have remained exactly the same while producing a different outcome (Harris 2014). For Harris, this example illustrates a difficulty for traditional conceptions of *free will* that require the possibility of acting otherwise under identical antecedent conditions. Fifth, Harris examines the relationship between moral responsibility and determinism. Harris argues that moral responsibility requires the possibility of acting otherwise, whereas determinism appears to challenge this possibility by treating actions as consequences of antecedent causes (Harris 2014). Because individual actions are determined by antecedent conditions that they themselves cannot control, Harris questions whether they deserve moral blame in the traditional sense. Consequently, Harris challenges the notion of ultimate moral responsibility while allowing for practical measures intended to prevent harm and protect society. Sixth, Harris contrasts the first-person experience of choosing freely with the third-person scientific explanation of human behavior. Harris acknowledges that individuals often experience themselves as autonomous agents who choose freely (Harris 2014). From a deterministic perspective, human behavior arises from antecedent causes, including genetic, environmental, and neural factors, many of which operate beyond conscious awareness.

Thus, although individuals regard themselves as free agents from the first-person perspective, Harris believes that this experience is not evidence of *free will*. For Harris, the experience of making a choice does not refute a deterministic explanation of human behavior, because the conscious experience of choosing does not establish ultimate control over the causes of that choice. Seventh, Dennett contends that the existence of unconscious origins does not, by itself, eliminate moral responsibility (Harris 2014). Harris responds that thoughts and desires can arise without necessarily being consciously initiated, raising the question of whether conscious awareness exercises the kind of control required for ultimate authorship. He also questions whether Dennett's account adequately explains actions influenced by unconscious neural processes. Harris argues that compatibilists redefine freedom in a way that, in his view, fails to address the more profound problem of whether individuals exercise ultimate control over their thoughts and actions (Harris 2014). Harris therefore maintains that *free will* is an *illusion*. Drawing on neuroscience, Harris argues that neural processes can occur before individuals become consciously aware of their intentions, raising questions about moral responsibility and the biological, psychological, and environmental influences on decision-making. Dennett, by contrast, defends compatibilism, maintaining that meaningful agency and moral responsibility can exist within a causally determined world. Their disagreement therefore, centers on whether the causal antecedents of human actions undermine free will, meaningful agency, and moral responsibility. This disagreement becomes particularly significant when evaluating Harris's interpretation of neuroscientific evidence, especially Benjamin Libet's findings on the relationship between neural activity preceding movement and conscious awareness of the intention to act. A careful compatibilist response must consider whether such findings genuinely undermine conscious agency, meaningful deliberation, and moral responsibility.

## A Compatibilist Response to Sam Harris's Hard Incompatibilist Deterministic Objections

Sam Harris presents a strong objection to traditional conceptions of *free will*, as he argues that neurobiological, psychological, and environmental factors determine human thoughts, intentions, and actions, which are mostly beyond our control (Harris 2012). Harris acknowledges that human behavior has causes, but he argues that individuals are not the ultimate authors of their actions because they do not ultimately control the causes that shape their brains, desires, beliefs, and intentions. Harris therefore concludes that *free will*, understood as ultimate authorship or control, does not exist in the sense required for ultimate moral responsibility. A compatibilist response must therefore address Harris's central claim that causal determination is incompatible with meaningful human agency. In his compatibilist response to Harris, Dennett rejects the view that human beings must be independent of causal processes to possess *free will*. Dennett's central concern is not whether human actions have causes, but whether individuals possess the capacities required for meaningful agency. These capacities include deliberation, rational thought, anticipation of consequences, self-control, and the ability to respond to reasons (Dennett 1984, 2003). Dennett further argues that human beings have developed these capacities through evolutionary processes and that their causal and evolutionary histories do not render them meaningless. On the contrary, these capacities help explain how human beings can exercise increasingly sophisticated forms of control over their behavior. From this viewpoint, Harris is right to argue that individuals do not select their genes, childhood experiences, brain development, or many of the conditions that shape their character, as these are determined by biological and environmental factors. However, acknowledging these causal influences does not, by itself, establish that meaningful human control is impossible. An individual can exercise existing capacities to think, evaluate reasons, control impulses, and change their future behavior, even if they are not the ultimate cause of their character. The fact that these processes have causal antecedents does not, by itself, undermine their role in enabling human agency. A compatibilist can therefore accept Harris's emphasis on the causal origins of human behavior without accepting his conclusion that causal determination is incompatible with meaningful agency. Compatibilist Harry Frankfurt provides another important response to Harris's challenge. Frankfurt (1969) argues that meaningful freedom of the will does not require individuals to be the ultimate sources of their own desires. Instead, he emphasizes the relationship between an individual's first-order desires and their higher-order attitudes toward those desires. In addition to having first-order desires, individuals can reflect on those desires and form second-order volitions concerning which desires they want to become their effective will. For Frankfurt, freedom of the will involves the alignment between an individual's effective first-order desire and the second-order volition with which they identify (Frankfurt 1969). Frankfurt's account is relevant to Harris's challenge because it suggests that meaningful freedom does not require individuals to be the ultimate creators of their desires or psychological dispositions. Frankfurt's argument suggests that meaningful agency does not require individuals to be the ultimate creators of their desires. What

matters is the relationship between an individual's first-order desires and their higher-order volitions concerning those desires. An individual can reflect on their desires and form a higher-order volition concerning which desire they want to govern their actions. When the desire that effectively moves an individual aligns with their relevant second-order volition, Frankfurt regards an individual's will as free in the sense specified by his account (Frankfurt 1969).

An important point is that Frankfurt's hierarchical account of freedom of the will does not, by itself, require a commitment to either determinism or indeterminism. He argues that one can accept the idea of causally determined free will. On this account, an individual's will may be causally determined while still satisfying Frankfurt's conditions for freedom of the will (Frankfurt 1969). John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998) develop another significant compatibilist account centred on reasons-responsiveness. They argue that moral responsibility does not require an individual to be the ultimate source of their actions. Instead, Fischer and Ravizza argue that moral responsibility depends on whether an action issues from the agent's own appropriately reason-responsive mechanism (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). The central question is therefore not simply whether the agent could have acted otherwise, but whether the action issued from a mechanism that satisfies the relevant conditions of reasons-responsiveness and ownership. Fischer and Ravizza do not state that a morally responsible individual has to respond appropriately to each reason. Their account requires a mechanism that is moderately reasons-responsive: it must exhibit an appropriate pattern of receptivity to reasons and some capacity to react to them across relevant possible situations (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). The relevance of this account to Harris's argument is that it offers an alternative understanding of agency and moral responsibility. Consider an individual deciding whether to accept a job offer. The decision may be influenced by upbringing, personality, previous experiences, financial circumstances, emotions, and neural processes. The individual did not independently choose the factors that shaped these dispositions and circumstances. Nevertheless, the individual can weigh the advantages and disadvantages of accepting the offer and reach a decision through their own decision-making mechanism. From Fischer and Ravizza's compatibilist perspective, the presence of causal influences does not, by itself, establish that an individual lacks agency or moral responsibility. The key issue is whether the action issues from the individual's own mechanism and whether that mechanism satisfies the relevant conditions of reasons-responsiveness and ownership (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). Because their account does not make moral responsibility depend on an unrestricted ability to do otherwise, it offers a compatibilist explanation of how responsibility can be reconciled with causal determinism (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). This poses a direct challenge to Harris's assertion that causal determination prevents us from having genuine moral responsibility.

Harris draws on neuroscientific evidence, particularly the findings of Libet et al. (1983), to challenge traditional conceptions of *free will* and compatibilist responses to them. The finding that neural activity can precede reported conscious awareness of an intention raises questions about whether conscious intention is the ultimate initiating source of voluntary action. Harris interprets such findings as consistent with his argument that conscious intentions arise from prior neural processes rather than

from an independently self-originating will (Harris 2012). Nevertheless, Libet's findings must be interpreted cautiously when drawing philosophical conclusions about *free will*. The presence of neural activity before reported conscious awareness does not, by itself, establish that a decision has already been completed unconsciously or that conscious reasoning and action control play no role. Moreover, because Libet's experiments focused on simple, relatively arbitrary movements, it remains uncertain how far their findings generalize to complex decisions involving deliberation, planning, and the evaluation of competing reasons. Libet's findings therefore do not, by themselves, establish that *free will* is an *illusion*. Alfred Mele, a compatibilist, provides valuable insights for evaluating Harris's interpretations of Libet's findings. According to Mele, results and conclusions such as those of Libet imply that conscious processes do play a role in decision-making. Mele emphasises that Libet's experiments involved simple, relatively arbitrary movements, such as wrist flexion, which may not adequately represent the processes involved in ordinary, deliberative decision-making. Ordinary decision-making can involve reasoning, evaluating alternatives, anticipating consequences, planning, and adapting to circumstances. The presence of neural activity before a simple movement therefore does not, by itself, demonstrate that the decision-making process has already been completed (Mele 2009). This distinction is important for compatibilists in responding to Harris. Compatibilism does not require conscious intention to be independent of neural processes. Unconscious neural processes can influence intentions, while conscious reasoning also contributes causally to evaluating alternatives, making choices, regulating actions, and forming plans. Thus, the involvement of prior neural processes may challenge the notion of ultimate, independent self-authorship, but it does not by itself show that conscious deliberation is causally ineffective or that meaningful compatibilist agency is impossible. Harris's argument also raises the question of whether an individual could have acted otherwise. Harris contends that if an action is entirely dictated by antecedent conditions, the agent could not have acted differently while those conditions and the pertinent laws of nature persisted unchanged. For incompatibilists who regard the ability to do otherwise as necessary for *free will*, the argument presents a serious challenge. Compatibilists, by contrast, need not interpret the ability to do otherwise as requiring the possibility of acting differently under exactly the same past conditions and laws of nature.

They can argue that meaningful freedom is not conditioned on the ability to carry out a different action while all the same conditions are present. Instead, compatibilists emphasize whether an action appropriately reflects the agent's own motivations, deliberative capacities, responsiveness to reasons, and forms of self-control. Harris's criticism nevertheless raises a genuine philosophical problem and should not simply be dismissed. His argument poses a serious challenge to theories that require individuals to be the ultimate sources of their own behavior, desires, and psychological dispositions. In other words, if *free will* implies that a person has to be fully responsible for their character, desires, and other psychological states, it is difficult to see how they could satisfy this requirement. Thus, Harris provides a strong reason to question the idea of a completely self-created agent. Compatibilists respond, however, that meaningful freedom and responsibility

need not require ultimate self-authorship. The disagreement between Dennett and Harris, therefore, centres on the conditions that meaningful *free will* must satisfy. Harris begins with the causal dependence of human thoughts and actions and concludes that *free will*, understood as ultimate self-authorship, does not exist. Dennett accepts that human thoughts and actions arise within causal processes but rejects Harris's conclusion that this causal dependence rules out meaningful agency. For Dennett, meaningful freedom depends on capacities such as deliberation, responsiveness to reasons, anticipation of consequences, self-control, and learning from experience (Dennett 2003). Frankfurt's hierarchical account of the will and Fischer and Ravizza's reasons-responsive account provide further philosophical support for the compatibilist position. Frankfurt argues that freedom of the will can involve an alignment between an individual's effective first-order desire and the higher-order volition with which the individual identifies (Frankfurt 1969), while Fischer and Ravizza argue that moral responsibility depends on an agent's own appropriately reasons-responsive mechanism rather than on complete independence from causal influences (Fischer & Ravizza 1998). Mele's analysis, meanwhile, challenges the inference that Libet's experimental findings establish the *illusory* nature of *free will*. Together, these arguments provide the philosophical basis for the *compatibilist integration framework* developed in this paper. The framework takes seriously Harris's argument that human thoughts and actions are substantially determined by preceding biological, psychological, environmental, and neural conditions. The framework takes seriously Harris's argument that human thoughts and actions are shaped by preceding biological, psychological, environmental, and neural conditions. The framework acknowledges the pervasive influence of causal conditions on human thought and action, and it does not seek to persuade Harris to adopt compatibilism. At the same time, however, it challenges the inference that the absence of ultimate self-authorship necessarily eliminates meaningful human agency.

The framework therefore distinguishes between ultimate causal authorship and meaningful practical agency. Ultimate causal authorship refers to the idea that an individual must be an independent, ultimate source of the causes of their own thoughts and actions. By contrast, meaningful practical agency refers to the capacities to deliberate, respond to reasons and motives, evaluate alternatives, regulate actions, formulate intentions, and modify future behavior. The framework therefore maintains that ultimate causal authorship is unnecessary but values meaningful practical agency. The proposed framework does not collapse Dennett's and Harris's positions into a single view; their fundamental disagreement remains. Harris rejects *free will* understood as the kind of ultimate self-authorship that he considers necessary for ultimate moral responsibility. Dennett, by contrast, defends a *naturalistic* conception of *free will* that he regards as compatible with causal determination. The integration framework brings selected insights from their arguments together in a limited way by showing how Harris's critique highlights the causal conditions underlying human choices, while Dennett explains how meaningful agency and responsibility may remain possible within such conditions. The central claim is not that Harris is wrong to emphasize causal influences or that neuroscientific research should be disregarded. Rather, the

argument is that the conclusion Harris draws from causal determination and neuroscientific evidence goes beyond what those considerations necessarily establish. The fact that human decisions have causal histories and that unconscious neural processes may contribute to decision-making does not by itself establish that deliberation, reasons-responsiveness, self-control, and moral responsibility are meaningless. A compatibilist can therefore acknowledge the causal and neuroscientific insights emphasized by Harris while maintaining that human beings may still exercise meaningful practical agency.

## The *Compatibilist Integration Framework*: Bridging Dennett's Compatibilism and Harris's Hard Incompatibilist Determinism

The disagreement between Dennett and Harris raises the question of whether causal determination is compatible with human beings' capacity to exercise meaningful agency and control over their lives. The *compatibilist integration framework* seeks to address this question while preserving the fundamental differences between the two theorists' positions. Harris argues that thoughts, desires, intentions, and actions arise from prior biological, psychological, and environmental conditions that individuals do not ultimately control. He therefore rejects *free will* understood as ultimate authorship of one's action (Harris 2012). By contrast, Dennett argues that meaningful agency and moral responsibility are compatible with causal determination (Dennett 2003, 2017). The framework preserves Harris's emphasis on the causal conditions of human behavior while developing Dennett's account of meaningful agency. The framework takes these causal influences seriously but rejects the inference that causal determination necessarily eliminates meaningful agency. Even if an individual is not the ultimate source of an action, they may still contribute causally to its performance through deliberation, intention, and self-regulation. Individuals can weigh arguments, consider alternatives, set goals, control impulses, make decisions, and modify their actions in response to changing circumstances. The fact that these activities have causal histories does not, by itself, negate their role in human agency. This framework distinguishes between ultimate causal authorship and meaningful practical agency. Ultimate causal authorship refers to the idea that individuals must be the ultimate, independently self-originating sources of their actions, a conception that Harris rejects. Harris emphasizes that human behavior arises within networks of biological, psychological, social, and environmental causes (Harris 2012). By contrast, meaningful practical agency involves capacities for deliberation, responsiveness to reasons, intention formation, and self-regulation. Thus, the absence of ultimate causal authorship does not necessarily entail the absence of meaningful practical agency. Thinking and reflection are themselves parts of the causal processes that shape human behavior, a position consistent with Dennett's *naturalistic* account of *free will* (Dennett 2003, 2017). Libet's findings that certain neural activity precedes reported awareness of an intention have been used to question whether conscious intention initiates voluntary action (Libet et al. 1983). However, these findings alone do not prove that conscious agency is inactive or that *free will* is nonexistent. Subsequent discussions have highlighted methodological and

conceptual limitations in drawing broad conclusions about *free will* from Libet-style experiments (Brass et al. 2019). Neuroscientific findings may challenge the idea that conscious awareness always initiates action, but they do not, by themselves, settle the causal role of deliberation, intention, or self-control. The framework does not dismiss Harris's neuroscientific evidence; rather, it challenges the inference that neural causation necessarily eliminates meaningful agency. Harris presents a substantial challenge to the idea that individuals are the ultimate, self-created sources of their actions, but this challenge does not necessarily establish that meaningful control is impossible. Dennett's compatibilism offers an alternative account in which capacities such as deliberation, self-control, anticipation, learning, and responsiveness to reasons develop within causal processes and enable individuals to regulate their behavior. Thus, meaningful *free will* need not require independence from causal determination (Dennett 2003, 2017). The framework does not suggest that Harris accepts compatibilism. Harris rejects *free will* understood as ultimate authorship, whereas Dennett defends a *naturalistic* conception of meaningful freedom that he regards as compatible with causal determination. The distinction between ultimate causal authorship and meaningful practical agency also has implications for moral accountability.

If ultimate authorship is a necessary condition of moral accountability, Harris's argument presents a serious challenge to the possibility of holding individuals responsible. From a compatibilist perspective, accountability may instead be grounded in capacities such as understanding reasons, evaluating moral considerations, regulating conduct, and learning from the consequences of one's actions. These abilities can help us understand how praise, criticism, and punishment work when someone does something wrong (Dennett 2017). Conversely, coercion, manipulation, certain forms of brain injury, and developmental limitations may diminish responsibility, depending on how they affect an individual's understanding, control, and responsiveness to reasons. The framework also distinguishes determinism from *fatalism*. Determinism holds that events, including human actions, arise from prior conditions in accordance with causal laws; fatalism, by contrast, suggests that an outcome will occur regardless of what individuals do. Within a deterministic framework, deliberation and self-improvement can remain causally effective because they may influence subsequent decisions and outcomes. Although desires are shaped by biological, psychological, and social influences, individuals may still reflect on their motivations, evaluate alternatives, and regulate their responses through reasoning and self-control (Harris 2012, Dennett 2003). *The compatibilist integration framework* therefore incorporates Harris's emphasis on the causal conditions of human behavior while retaining Dennett's argument that causal determination does not, by itself, eliminate meaningful agency, responsibility, or self-control. It does not claim that Harris and Dennett ultimately defend the same conception of *free will*. Instead, it brings their arguments into productive philosophical dialogue by showing how Harris's challenge to ultimate causal authorship can be considered alongside Dennett's account of meaningful agency without requiring such authorship. The framework's central claim is that meaningful practical agency can be affirmed without requiring ultimate causal authorship. *Free will* need not be understood as a power to escape causation. Instead, it can be understood in terms of an agent's capacities

to deliberate, respond to reasons, form intentions, regulate behavior, learn from experience, and participate in the causal processes through which actions are produced. The framework consequently moves beyond the simple opposition between *free will* and determinism by distinguishing the metaphysical demand for ultimate authorship from the practical capacities through which human agency is exercised. The originality of the *compatibilist integration framework* lies not in reducing Dennett and Harris to a single position but in distinguishing the absence of ultimate causal authorship from the possibility of meaningful practical agency.

It preserves the force of Harris's causal and neuroscientific challenge while developing Dennett's compatibilist account of agency and responsibility. In this way, the framework offers a more nuanced account of how human beings can remain causally *embedded*[20] in the natural world while deliberating, making decisions, regulating their behavior, learning from experience, and potentially being held responsible for their actions.

This account of practical agency also provides a basis for reconsidering moral responsibility within a deterministic framework. Moral responsibility can be approached in a way that considers both accountability and the factors that shape human behavior, although the precise relationship between these considerations remains philosophically contested (Strawson 1962). Accountability may remain important to social order and justice, while recognizing the biological, psychological, and environmental influences on behavior may encourage a more informed and compassionate response (Duff 2001, Sapolsky 2017). Such an approach need not entail abandoning responsibility. Rehabilitation, education, and therapy can complement accountability by addressing factors that contribute to harmful behavior and supporting individuals in changing their future conduct (Ward & Maruna 2007). Research in neuroscience and psychology indicates that genetics, brain development, and environmental factors can influence decision-making (Libet 1999; Wegner 2002). However, the evidence that *neural processes* can precede conscious awareness does not, by itself, establish that *free will* or moral responsibility is impossible. Within a *naturalistic* framework, rational reflection and self-control can still play meaningful causal roles in human action (Dennett 2003). Taken together, these perspectives are consistent with the *compatibilist integration framework, which* recognizes both the causal conditions that shape human behavior and the possibility of meaningful agency and responsibility within those conditions.

## Conclusion

The debate between Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris demonstrates that the question of causal determinism does not by itself settle whether meaningful human agency is possible. Despite their disagreement, Dennett and Harris share several commitments: both reject libertarian or contra-causal conceptions of *free*

[20]*Embedded* here means that human beings are part of the natural causal order rather than separate from it. Their choices and actions are shaped by the biological, psychological, and environmental conditions in which they live.

*will*, adopt broadly *naturalistic* approaches to human beings, recognise the causal influences on human thought and behaviour, and regard scientific inquiry as important for understanding cognition and decision-making (Dennett 2003, 2017, Harris 2012). These shared commitments do not, however, mean that Harris accepts compatibilism. Their fundamental disagreement concerns the implications of causal determination for *free will* and moral responsibility. Dennett is a compatibilist who argues that meaningful freedom and moral responsibility remain possible in a causally ordered world. His account emphasises the capacities associated with meaningful agency, including deliberation, the ability to respond to reasons, self-control, and rational evaluation (Dennett 2003, 2017). Harris rejects *free will* understood as the ultimate authorship of one's thoughts and actions, arguing that individuals do not ultimately control the prior conditions from which their thoughts, desires, intentions, and actions arise (Harris 2012). He emphasises that thoughts, desires, intentions, and actions arise from prior conditions that individuals do not ultimately control, thereby challenging the idea that they are the ultimate authors of their actions (Harris 2012). To address this disagreement, this paper proposes a *compatibilist integration framework*. The framework does not claim that Dennett and Harris ultimately share the same theory of *free will*. Instead, it distinguishes between ultimate causal authorship and meaningful practical agency. If *free will* requires individuals to be the ultimate authors of their thoughts and actions, Harris's objection has considerable force. However, the absence of ultimate causal authorship does not necessarily preclude meaningful practical agency. Even though these capacities operate within causal processes, individuals can deliberate, respond to reasons, form intentions, regulate their behavior, learn from experience, and modify their future actions. The framework also distinguishes causal determinism from *fatalism*. Causal determinism does not imply that human efforts are causally irrelevant or that outcomes will occur regardless of what individuals do. Deliberation, education, reflection, and self-improvement can themselves influence future behavior by shaping decisions and subsequent actions. Similarly, neuroscientific findings, including those associated with Libet's experiments, provide evidence relevant to the role of unconscious neural processes but do not, by themselves, establish that conscious deliberation or practical agency is causally ineffective (Libet et al. 1983, Brass et al. 2019). This distinction is important for understanding moral responsibility. From a compatibilist perspective, moral responsibility need not require individuals to be the ultimate or uncaused authors of their actions. Instead, compatibilists may ground moral responsibility in capacities such as understanding reasons, exercising self-control, responding to moral considerations, and modifying behavior in light of experience (Dennett 2003, 2017). Therefore, meaningful accountability may remain possible while recognising the biological, psychological, and environmental influences on human behavior. The novelty of the compatibilist integration framework lies not in collapsing Dennett's and Harris's positions into one but in distinguishing the absence of ultimate causal authorship from the possibility of meaningful practical agency. It preserves Dennett's account of meaningful agency and responsibility while taking seriously Harris's challenge concerning the causal origins of human thought and action and the implications of neuroscientific evidence. The framework therefore examines how human beings can remain causally *embedded* in the natural world while

retaining capacities for deliberation, decision-making, self-regulation, and learning from experience. It also explores how these capacities may support meaningful moral responsibility.

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