BOOK REVIEWS

Freedom Evolves. DANIEL C. DENNETT. New York: Viking, 2003. xiii + 347 p. Cloth $24.95.*

Freedom Evolves is a vigorous and lively defense of a naturalistic, compatibilistic notion of freedom (and moral responsibility). It shows how these sorts of phenomena can be given evolutionary explanations; also, it exhibits the evolution of Daniel Dennett's own account of freedom, which he presented in his important contribution to the free will debates, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting.*[1] It responds to various objections to his sort of compatibilist account, comments on some contemporary philosophical literature, and also exhibits the connections between Dennett's approach to freedom and his influential accounts of consciousness, the self, and Darwinian evolutionary theory. Notably, Dennett connects the philosophical issues pertaining to free will with the insights and methodologies of contemporary psychologists such as Daniel Wegner and George Ainslie, economists such as Robert Frank, and biologists such as Richard Dawkins, Jared Diamond, Edward O. Wilson, and David Sloan Wilson. This is a synoptic and compendious book, not likely to be appealing to the more meticulous analytic philosophers. Its target, I would think, is primarily a more general audience of intellectuals and scholars in other fields, although even the most fastidious philosopher may find some intriguing, suggestive, and provocative observations.

The package of theses defended by Dennett is fairly familiar. Dennett argues that a "real" and robust sort of freedom is entirely compatible with a thoroughgoing, naturalistic causal determinism. The following statement nicely (if somewhat vaguely) captures Dennett's presuppositions and methodology: "My fundamental perspective is *naturalism*, the idea that philosophical investigations are not superior to, or prior to, investigations in the natural sciences, but in partnership with those truth-seeking enterprises, and that the proper job for philosophers here is to clarify and unite the often warring perspectives into a single vision of the universe" (15). He contends that nothing

* I am grateful for helpful comments by Al Mele and Manuel Vargas.

[1] Cambridge: MIT, 1984.

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in our practices or in critical reflection on them entails that we need to assume that indeterminism is true, or that we have (what he takes to be) mysterious, irreducible powers to "agent-cause" our behavior, or that materialism is false, and so forth. Further, the freedom we care about and our practices of holding each other morally responsible do not presuppose a kind of possibility to do otherwise that holds fixed all the details of the past and the natural laws. Nothing of significance is lost, then, if we give up this "libertarian" notion of freedom.

Although some theorists have evidently concluded from Dennett's previous defenses of materialistic accounts of mental states, consciousness, and the self, that "there is no room for Free Will" (on such an account), Dennett points out that this is a mistake. He develops a series of thought experiments, or, in his much-preferred terminology, "Just-So Stories," that employ insights and analytical approaches from evolutionary biology, economics, and psychology to show how one can defend a strong notion of freedom even in a materialistic, causally deterministic world. Of course, the tools for defending such a view will include the recognition of the extraordinary *complexity* of (physical) creatures like us, and the appropriateness of *different levels of description of*, or *different stances to*, such organisms.

Dennett tells an elaborate Just-So Story in which initially simple organisms evolve into complex creatures that have and respond to reasons, make choices, and have freedom, even in a causally deterministic world. A landmark event in this Story takes place when the creatures develop the ability to speculate about the future, to consider possible threats that jeopardize their interests and plans, and to make choices that help them to *avoid* those projected future threats. "Evitability," then, is a significant achievement, and clearly confers an important evolutionary advantage. And, Dennett argues, the sort of evitability in question is not understood in terms of the "possibility to do otherwise, holding all the details of the past and natural laws fixed"; it is perfectly compatible with causal determinism.

Much of what is of value in this book is contained in the details of the Just-So Stories. There are also intriguing critical discussions of the indeterministic theory of free will presented by Robert Kane, and some of the views about the human will suggested by the neuroscientist, Benjamin Libet. Dennett builds on previous work that suggests a helpful kind of skepticism about simple thought experiments in general, and, in particular, those that posit the weird inculcation of beliefs, desires, and other mental states (by nefarious neurosurgeons and their ilk). Dennett here explores Alfred Mele's example of Ann and Beth, who are allegedly psychologically isomorphic except that Beth has had crucial mental states induced by a neuroscientist. Al-

though Mele's point was primarily to defend a *historical* account of autonomy, Dennett addresses some complexities in such putative examples of induction of mental states.

I agree with Dennett about a lot: that causal determinism is compatible with a sort of freedom and also with moral responsibility, that moral responsibility is properly understood in terms of a kind of sensitivity to reasons, that this sensitivity can be present even in the absence of libertarian freedom, and so forth. I am also comfortable with a "naturalistic" methodology (on most plausible understandings of "naturalism"), although I suppose that I would want something slightly different: an approach that is *compatible* with naturalism, even if it does not *entail* it.[2]

Nevertheless, I have some significant disagreements with Dennett. One of these disagreements pertains to what might be called "libertarian freedom." Both of us hold that such freedom is not necessary for moral responsibility. But I take seriously the libertarian's wish to have such freedom, and take it as significant that causal determinism evidently rules out such freedom; Dennett, in contrast, dismisses this sort of freedom as uninteresting. For example, Dennett says:

> Many philosophers have assumed without specific argument that when we ask a question about what was possible, we are—and should be—interested in knowing whether, in *exactly* the same circumstances, the same event would recur. We have argued that in spite of its traditional endorsement by philosophers, this policy is *never* followed by serious investigators of possibility and is, in any event, unmotivated: It *couldn't* give you an answer that could satisfy your curiosity. The burden now rests with those who think otherwise to explain why 'real' possibility demands a narrow choice of X [the set of possible worlds relevant to the possibility-claim]—or why we should be interested in such a concept of possibility, regardless of its 'reality' (82).

It is completely uncontroversial that there are various kinds of possibility, and thus various corresponding sets of possible worlds (relevant to the possibility-claims in question). Further, I absolutely agree with Dennett that different contexts of inquiry will render different notions of possibility relevant, and there are important contexts of inquiry to which broader, rather than narrower, notions of possibil-

[2] The term, 'naturalism', is bandied about quite promiscuously, and it is often unclear what a theorist means by this term. I would not want a theory of moral responsibility that entails or presupposes materialism about the mind, for example (although I myself am inclined to accept materialism). It would also be unattractive to make it a *requirement* of an adequate theory of moral responsibility that God does not exist.

ity are appropriate. For example, we are often interested in what is physically possible (not just what is physically possible, given a fixed past and set of natural laws). We are interested in what sorts of things are consistent with the laws of nature, and since we do not know the details of the total true description of the past, we will sensibly inquire, in many contexts, simply about what kinds of things are consistent with the laws of nature. Our epistemic limitations, together with our pragmatic goals, make it perfectly appropriate for us to concern ourselves with broad notions of physical possibility in our scientific theorizing.

But it does *not* follow that the narrower notion of possibility is not important, and, in particular, that it is not important to our freedom. When we think of ourselves as having various pathways genuinely open to us, it is very plausible to suppose that we are picturing various paths that branch off a fixed path, holding the natural laws fixed. That is, when we think of ourselves as being free to pursue a particular path into the future, we explicitly or implicitly think of that path as an extension of the actual past (holding the laws of nature fixed). We typically do not think of ourselves as having the power so to act that the past would have been different from the way it actually was, or so to act that the laws of nature would have been different. So, the picture is this: the various accessible pathways into the future branch off a fixed past (and contain the actual natural laws), and the reasons relevant to our practical reasoning are reasons that obtain only along the accessible pathways. A benefit that exists along some path is pertinent to my practical reasoning only if I can "get there from here."

The above picture lies behind various formalizations of a "Basic Argument" for the incompatibility of causal determinism and free will, in the sense that involves genuine access to alternative possibilities.[3] One can deny the picture—that is, one can deny that the past or the laws are fixed in the relevant sense.[4] So it is not uncontroversial that the picture corresponds to the correct account of possibility, in the free will sense. But it is an extremely plausible, attractive, and natural picture. I find it hard to give up the idea that my freedom, in a given context, consists in my power to add to the given past, holding the natural laws fixed. The picture of "multiple pasts"—

[3] I discuss at greater length Dennett's critique of the Basic Argument in my contribution to the "Author-Meets-Critics" session on the book at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meetings, March 2004 (Pasadena, California).

[4] I discuss such moves in John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 67–86.

different pasts for each path I could take—is as unintuitive as it is unlovely. And the Humean idea that I can write the laws of nature (and that there are no laws of nature until the end of time) strikes me as somewhat bizarre. This picture of the structure of free will possibility is precisely what must be abandoned by the compatibilist about causal determinism and free will, in the sense that involves genuine access to alternative possibilities.

Perhaps then it is not surprising that philosophers have been concerned about precisely this sort of freedom for thousands of years. (By the way, the Basic Argument goes back to Origen—not to be confused with one of Dennett's favorite topics, *The Origin of Species*!) I, like Dennett, am a compatibilist about moral responsibility and causal determinism. But I do not think that compatibilism makes progress unless it takes the libertarian's concerns seriously. It does not make progress if it abruptly dismisses a set of concerns that not only resonates deeply with common sense, but with thousands of years of philosophical analysis.

I wish to end with a few reflections on features of Dennett's methodology. As is well known, Dennett does not trust philosophical "thought experiments," about which he expresses considerable skepticism. He is particularly wary of thought experiments involving the artificial induction or inculcation of mental states (by "nefarious neurosurgeons"—or even nice ones, presumably). But he engages (especially in this book) in his own story telling. Why exactly are Dennett's Just-So Stories any different from traditional philosophical thought experiments? In both cases there is significant simplification and abstraction. Dennett gives hegemony to the fictional stories that are "dressed up" with technical or "scientific" features, but why? After all, these stories (like the traditional philosophical thought experiments) are abstractions, the conclusions of which need to be applied with delicacy and sensitivity to the nuances of the real world. In my view, a philosophical thought experiment *does* need to be handled with care and extreme caution; but this does not imply that such thought experiments cannot be useful and illuminating.[5]

Philosophical thought experiments are stories that invite us to consider our principles more carefully. In some instances, they force us to give a more nuanced analysis that is sensitive to the complexity of the relevant terrain. I often feel that Dennett's discussion could bene-

[5] See Fischer and Mark Ravizza, "Introduction," in Fischer and Ravizza, eds., *Ethics: Problems and Principles* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 1992), pp. 12–16 and 45–51; and Fischer, "Stories," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XX (1996): 1–14.

fit from a subtler, more articulated view of the target phenomena. For just one example, Dennett often speaks of "freedom," without distinguishing what I think are importantly different *kinds* of freedom. If one abruptly dismisses the thought experiments (as well as other, more traditional forms of philosophical analysis), one can fail to see the complexity of the notions of freedom and responsibility.[6]

Dennett is at his best when he is essentially challenging philosophers to be broader in our intellectual gaze, rendering philosophical theorizing continuous with cutting-edge work in the social and natural sciences. But evidently he feels that the need to avoid parochialism is asymmetric. Here was an opportunity to introduce a broader intellectual audience to the extraordinarily lively and rich contemporary philosophical debates about free will and moral responsibility, but the opportunity was lost.

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[6] I do not suppose that we should do without the sorts of scientific approaches and models invoked by Dennett. I simply do not think we should abandon philosophical analysis and abruptly discard philosophical thought experiments. The Rawlsian notion of seeking a *wide* reflective equilibrium seems particularly appealing here—see Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), pp. 10–11.