



Book Review

Freedom Evolves by Daniel C. Dennett. London, Allen Lane, 2003.

Reviewed by Neil Levy

Who better to bring evolutionary theory to bear on the free will debate than Daniel Dennett? Dennett is the author of *Elbow Room*, a spirited defence of compatibilism (that is, the thesis that free will and determinism are compatible) and of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, an exploration of evolutionary theory, which effectively communicates the excitement and power of Darwinian thought. He is also an eminent philosopher of mind. But, by Dennett's high standards, this book is disappointing. It adds little to the views set out in his previous books, and where the material is new, it is often unclear.

Dennett's principal thesis is that free will is an ability that human beings, and only human beings, have as a result of their evolutionary history. The ability to act freely, as Dennett understands it, is the ability to negotiate obstacles in the world successfully. It is, as he says, the power to make what was formerly inevitable into the 'evitable'. This is a power that comes in degrees. Inanimate matter possesses none of it, bacteria possess a little, as a consequence of their ability to detect danger and to propel themselves away from it. Human beings have a great deal of this power, as a result of our ability to anticipate the consequences of our actions

and to modify them accordingly. This ability, to construct counterfactuals of great complexity and to model the actions of thousands of interacting forces and agents, is what gives us free will, in the only sense that matters. It allows us, and requires us, to shape our actions to our moral obligations.

All this, I believe, is true and insightful, and it is a pleasure to watch Dennett develop the argument for this view. It might also come as a surprise, to those who are familiar with the debates over the role of evolution in human culture, to see how far Dennett really is from the Darwinian fundamentalists (as Stephen Jay Gould called them) with whom he continues to associate himself. He argues that evolution, via the standard mechanisms and through cultural evolution, has equipped us with the ability to reject the rationales of natural selection. This is far stronger a case for the relative autonomy of human norms and intellectual powers than has ever been conceded by Pinker, Dawkins, E. O. Wilson, and the other fundamentalists.

But the case is lacking in the details that would make it convincing. This is especially troubling when Dennett turns to the last step, the stage of evolution which carries us beyond the other animals and gives us a free will which

is quantitatively and qualitatively different from anything they possess. The problem comes out most clearly in his discussion of some recent work in neuroscience, which has been taken by some as casting doubt on free will. Consider the famous experiments of Benjamin Libet. Libet asked subjects to move a hand whenever they felt like it. They were also asked to take note of the position of a dot moving fast around the circumference of a circle marked off like a clock face, at the moment when they decided, consciously, to move their hand. Meanwhile, Libet monitored the subjects' brains for the *readiness potential*, which we know precedes action. He found that the readiness potential was detectable in the brain slightly before subjects reported the feeling of conscious will. Thus, Libet concluded, our brains initiate action, not us: we get a report that action has been initiated, sometime between the initiation and the action. If this is so, our consciousness might not be in charge at all. It is a mere observer, not an initiator, of action (though Libet himself thought it might still exercise a veto power over actions).

Dennett does a good job of showing that Libet's experiment does not have the implications it is sometimes taken to have. Libet implicitly identifies the real self with a Cartesian control centre, the punctual, conscious, self. It is because this self is not in charge, was not the initiator of the action, that free will is threatened. But, as Dennett points out, if we insist on identifying the self with this Cartesian ego, then we have no reason to put much faith in the report of the experience of conscious will. If initiating action can be outsourced, then so can perception.

But if unconscious processes are sophisticated and discriminating enough to begin actions (and Libet's hypothesis is that extremely complex, as well as simple, actions are triggered unconsciously), then why should these processes not be sufficient of themselves to ground free will and moral responsibility? *I* am spread out across my entire brain, not confined to one isolated region of it. So I am in charge

all the time, from initiation of the action (indeed, well before) to its completion (and beyond).

All well and good, but if the self, free will and responsibility can be smeared across the brain, why does Dennett persist in trying to show that the simultaneity judgment Libet relies upon is distorted by our usual action-monitoring habits? Why does it matter? Haven't we just said that moral agency is distributed, not punctual? I suggest that Dennett cannot abandon the notion of a privileged control centre, because no matter how convinced he might be that agency can be distributed, he still believes that the special kind of self that we, and only we, have sets us apart from other animals, making us uniquely free and responsible. It creates a 'special category of voluntary actions that sets us apart' (251). But how is the self special, what role, precisely, does it play and how does that enhance freedom? It enables us to keep in contact with ourselves, providing a centre of narrative gravity, Dennett says. This is an interesting suggestion, and one can begin to speculate about how it might make a difference to freedom. But we are forced to speculate, because Dennett doesn't say. He seems torn between two views of free will: one according to which our ability to manipulate the world and overcome obstacles in it is simply the consequence of powers of imagination and flexible cognition which we share with other animals, though we have them to a greater degree, and another in which our conscious self sets us apart from them, enhancing our freedom exponentially. He oscillates between these positions, sometimes defending the distributed self, in which consciousness plays no privileged role, and sometimes insisting on its importance. Of course, both these positions could be correct at the same time: we might possess 'merely animal' freedom, to a greater extent than other animals, *and* a uniquely human liberty. But Dennett doesn't seem to be aware that he is discussing two separate kinds of freedom, and therefore doesn't tell us how they fit together.

In the end, then, I am unconvinced that *Freedom Evolves* enhances our understanding of free will as an evolved capacity, beyond what we had already learned from Dennett's earlier work. This is still an exciting exploration of the interface between philosophy and the sciences. It is a book by Dan Dennett, and it is therefore impossible to read it without being

educated and entertained. A disappointing Dennett book is better than none at all.

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