



Essay Review

Dennett and the Darwinizing of Free Will

By

David P. Barash

Freedom Evolves By Daniel C. Dennett
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It has ruefully been noted that we have lots of philosophy professors, but precious few genuine philosophers. But at least, we also have Daniel Dennett. He wrote the best book on evolution by a non-biologist (Dennett, 1995), and has been a tireless, effective, and creative advocate for incorporating natural selection into the purview of philosophers and thinkers generally. Dennett is not just a philosophy professor, but a genuine philosopher, much to our benefit. In *Freedom Evolves*, he takes on the question of free will and determinism, one of the oldest and most intransigent of conundrums, transporting the discussion where it belongs, into the realm of Darwinian thought.

And conundrum it is. Thus, to my mind (and I believe I write this of my own free will!), there can be no such thing as free will for the committed scientist, in his or her professional life. Thus, science itself presupposes that every phenomenon has a cause. We may speak of “spontaneous combustion” or a “spontaneous abortion” or even “spontaneous applause,” but in each of these cases, some cause is more than

likely... it is essential to a sober, naturalistic worldview. “Spontaneous” is simply another way of saying: “cause unknown,” not “uncaused.” Similarly, we are unlikely to describe a stone as moving “spontaneously,” not only because it lacks any possible organs of volition, but because it is entirely subject to the laws of physics. What, then, about a jellyfish that moves “spontaneously”? A rhinoceros? A person?

At the same time, I suspect that we all – even the most hard-headed materialists – live with an unspoken hypocrisy: even as we assume determinism in our intellectual pursuits and professional lives, we actually experience our subjective lives as though free will reigns supreme. In our heart of hearts, we *know* that in most ways that really count (and many that don’t), we have plenty of free will, and so do those around us. Inconsistent? Yes, indeed. But like the denial of death, it is a useful inconsistency, and perhaps even one that is essential. (Nor is the free will/determinism debate unique in this regard. We might add Hume’s demon-

stration of the impossibility of proving causation itself, and Berkeley's questioning of the existence of an objective world. In many ways, we are all forced to live with a degree of absurdity, if only because to acknowledge it in our daily lives is to admit yet more absurdity!

Some philosophers and neurobiologists have sought to rescue free will – as a scientific prospect, not merely an emotional necessity – by enlisting quantum indeterminism, arguing that the physics of very small particles (or waves, or whatever) introduces room for “genuine” spontaneity. I'm not in the least persuaded by such sleight of hand, and neither, it seems, is Dennett. By what logic could free will derive from genuinely random emanations, or chaotic functions, any more than from the most rigid billiard-ball expectations of rigid determinism? As the monarch of Siam noted in *The King and I*, “it's a puzzlement.”

The difficulty goes deeper yet, penetrating the realm of personal responsibility, punishment, and praise. If, for example, to do something “of our own free will” means that it was utterly uncaused, then how can we be blamed, or praised, for it? But if caused, by previous events, neurochemical necessities, ionic perturbations of voltage differentials across cell membranes, then the same question applies.

Two of my favorite examinations of this question, neither of which appear in *Freedom Evolves*, were contributed by B. F. Skinner, and Jean-Paul Sartre, representing opposite poles of the debate. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner argued that

We recognize a person's dignity or worth when we give him credit for what he had done. The amount we give is inversely proportional to the conspicuousness of the causes of his behavior. If we do not know why a person acts as he does, we attribute his behavior to him. We try to gain additional credit for ourselves by concealing the reasons why we behave in given ways or by claiming to have acted

for less powerful reasons.

Skinner goes on to applaud the abolition of

autonomous man, the inner man, the homunculus, the possessing demon, the man defended by the literatures of freedom and dignity,” adding that “his abolition has long been overdue. Autonomous man is a device used to explain what we cannot explain in any other way. He has been constructed from our ignorance, and as our understanding increases, the very stuff of which he is composed vanishes. Science does not dehumanize man, it dehomunculizes him... Only by dispossessing him can we turn to the real causes of human behavior (1971).

By contrast, just as Skinner contended that we are not really free but like to pretend that we are, Sartre insisted that we really *are* free, but like to pretend that we aren't! In a famous phrase, we are “condemned to be free.” For many existentialists, accordingly, “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is” (1948).

One can glimpse a possible reconciliation between a sociobiological and scientific “take” on human freedom, and that espoused by an existential, humanistic perspective (Barash, 2000). But for now, and for most people, the two seem far apart indeed. Into this fray – or morass - marches Daniel Dennett, arguing with typical panache that, as his book's title makes clear, freedom evolves. Dennett shows not only that the free will/determinism debate is not only overdrawn, but that it gains immensely from a Darwinian perspective. Free will, as he cogently argues, is adaptive: the ability to adjust behavior according to conditions has itself been selected for. And, moreover, it takes a larger number of neurons to achieve this than to behave more “automatically.” Also, an ability

to adjust differs from a necessity to do so. We can therefore choose to behave nonadaptively, even maladaptively, at least within limits. (And afterward, of course, we might ask ourselves whether we could have done differently! Dennett himself refers to Martin Luther's famous declaration "Here I stand. I can do no other.")

Dennett maintains that "determination is not the same as causation, that knowing that a system is deterministic tells you nothing about the interesting causation – or lack of causation – among the events that transpire within it," although admitting that it's a controversial contention, one that flies in the face of a long tradition. He points out that "ecumenical hybridism" is not genuinely a route to becoming a famous thinker, resulting in especially rigid dichotomies when it comes to the matter of free will: "And so the various compromise proposals, the suggestions that determinism is compatible with at least some kinds of free will, are resisted as bad bargains, dangerous subversions of our moral foundations." The fact that Dennett – no shrinking violet when it comes to staking out a unilateralist perspective – establishes a bridging position on the matter of free will, itself suggests that such a position likely has something going for it.

He has been especially diligent in seeking out recent literature, including just-published books by psychiatrist George Ainslie, philosophers Merlin Donald and Robert Kane, and many others. These up-to-the-minute references alone, as well as Dennett's cogent elucidations and ripostes, are worth the price of his most recent book.

There is much here to pique the curiosity, and challenge the mind, of biologists and evolutionary psychologists no less than philosophers. For example, *Freedom Evolves* introduced me to the fascinating work of Benjamin Libet, who revealed the existence of "readiness potentials," unconscious neural events that reliably occur a few hundred milliseconds before subjects realized they had decided to perform a simple physical movement. This work has been cited,

waggishly, as showing that we don't have free will so much as "free won't," but is it really as devastating for "autonomous man" as Dennett believes? Maybe a readiness potential simply indicates that we actually make up our minds a fraction of a second or so before we realize that we do. Does this circumscribe our freedom or merely reset it a bit earlier than each of us used to believe? Perhaps decision-making simply takes time.

Dennett has previously been criticized for under-estimating the power of consciousness; his book, *Consciousness Explained*, has unfairly been derided as "consciousness ignored." (This characterization has at least some legitimacy, however, just as Dennett's reiteration "This is *not* a denial of consciousness," evokes the surreal echo of René Magritte's celebrated painting of a pipe, titled "Ceci n'est pas une pipe.") Dennett will doubtless be similarly accused of under-estimating free will, although in fact, by "naturalizing" it, he incorporates the concept into the pantheon of researchable questions. As he puts it, "By trying to answer the questions, by sketching out the non-miraculous paths that can take us all the way from senseless atoms to freely chosen actions, we open up handholds for the imagination. The compatibility of free will and science ... is not as inconceivable as it once seemed."

Not that I am fully in lock-step with the estimable Dr. Dennett. I do not share his enthusiasm, for example, for John Horton Conway's "Game of Life," a network of computer simulations that Dennett considers deeply portentous, but which seems to me more of a computer game for Asperger's sufferers who cannot tell automatons from genuine life-forms. And I'm not convinced that Dennett's distinction between "determined" and "inevitable" is as significant as he so triumphantly maintains.

Nonetheless, Dennett wields a formidable intellect, and, on occasion, a wicked pen, nearly always supporting science in general and evolutionary biology in particular. I'm glad he's on our side. Read him to make sense of his own

brilliant aphorism: “If you make yourself really small, you can externalize virtually everything.” And also to understand why so many pseudo-scientists find themselves yelling “Stop that crow!” (The latter is a cogent and hilarious reference, fully explained in the book, to Dumbo’s feather and its iconic power.) And to profit from his wonderful riff on “benselfishness,” a durable portmanteau pun on beneficence, selfishness, and Ben Franklin. (Ask yourself, for example, whether *genuine* altruists would collude with others of their ilk, thereby enhancing the fitness of “altruism” genes but denying benefit to selfish alternatives.)

I could go on, both in praise of *Freedom Evolves*, and in sharing the personal ruminations (inevitably?) evoked by so provocative a book. But the final words should belong to Dennett himself. Here, then, is part of his concluding paragraph:

Far from being an enemy... the evolutionary perspective is an indispensable ally. I have not sought to replace the voluminous work on ethics with some Darwinian *alternative* [emphasis in original], but rather to place that work on the foundation it deserves: a realistic, naturalistic, potentially unified vision of our place in nature. Recognizing our uniqueness as reflective, communicating animals does not require any human “exceptionalism” that must shake a defiant fist at Darwin

and shun the insights to be harvested from that beautifully articulated and empirically anchored system of thought. We can understand how our freedom is greater than that of other creatures, and see how this heightened capacity carries moral implications: noblesse oblige. We are in the best position to decide what to do next, because we have the broadest knowledge and hence the best perspective on the future. What that future holds in store for our planet is up to all of us, reasoning together.

David P. Barash, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A.
Email: dpbarash@u.washington.edu.

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