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*Review Essay*

## Daniel Dennett's Choice

by  
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For thirty years Daniel C. Dennett has been creating a body of work that explores the relation of mind and brain. Each part of his theory has provoked conversation and controversy along the way. His general method of inquiry requires adopting “the intentional stance”; this orientation is one of those debatable objects in his tool kit. Traces of all the components of his model are visible in his most recent work. With his new book, *Freedom Evolves* Daniel Dennett has written yet another surprising and controversial work. His previous books have drawn a mixed audience of professionals and lay readers, and this new work is meant to do the same. Dennett's earlier notorious books include *Brainstorms* (1978), *Elbow Room; The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (1984), *The Intentional Stance* (1987), *Consciousness Explained* (1991), and *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995).

Dennett's general approach is to apply the empirical findings of neuroscience and the methods of evolutionary game theory to the explanation of human consciousness and cooperative social behavior. The reception of Dennett's work is consistently not what he would prefer. Professional scientists and philosophers regard his summaries and juxtapositions of their work accurate enough but usually irrelevant in a deep sense to the issue at hand. They are slightly annoyed. The lay audience, on the other hand, is swept away by his breathless reporting of new scientific findings, his clever use of metaphor and thought-experiment, and with his mischievous irreverence. They are non-critical; they have no basis for evaluating his claims.

Neither response is satisfying. As any writer knows, it's difficult to serve two masters. I fear Dennett's latest book will fare the same with his readers. But readers there will be. He's got a reputation.

Let's begin with a note concerning the subject matter of Dennett's books as indicated by its title, *Freedom Evolves*. On the evolutionary side of the equation, Dennett aims to show how evolutionary thinking can account

for everything “from senseless atoms to freely chosen actions.” He doesn’t. To do so may be in principle a doable project, but it isn’t accomplished here. It is a sketchy sketch, at best.

On the freedom side of the ledger the reader must quickly realize that Dennett’s topic is free will, not political freedom or psychological freedom from one’s worries, or any of the other kinds of freedom that might legitimately be of concern. But free will is no little thing. On it hangs our humanity. If persons are not free in their choosing then they are not moral agents responsible for the intentions and consequences of “their” actions. In fact, without freedom of choice homo sapiens only behave; they do not act. And so they are not persons at all.

But here’s the rub: if evolutionary theory bases the life sciences on the non-life sciences such that human life is at bottom causally determined, how can there exist creatures with wills free of those causal chains involving the familiar furniture of the world? How can a micro and macro deterministic world give birth to freedom?

This puzzle is an artifact of exaggerated notions of both free will and determinism, according to Dennett. And so he embarks on a mission of revision: we must deflate “hard determinism” and “radical libertarianism.” (pp. 97-98) Dennett means to put us on a diet, get us to substitute new low-cal versions of these ideas for the overly rich ones we’ve been used to eating. But as anyone who has seriously attempted a diet knows, it’s torture. And it usually doesn’t work.

Dennett’s prescription for intellectual health requires us to accept diminished definitions of determinism and free will—soft bagels and “lite” cream cheese. The revisionist versions of freedom and determinism are not what we want or need. We’ve been baited and switched. We feel cheated. We are already hungry again. And we are not amused. Dennett tries to reassure us; you’ve got free will (don’t worry), but it’s not the kind you thought you had. The modest kind you actually have “is all the freedom worth wanting.” Get used to it. The freedom you are addicted to is not good for you. Learn to live with less. Less is more.

So now we know. We know what we are getting into when we let him get his foot in our door. Dennett’s strategy is to substitute a “hermeneutical switch of perspectives” (heuristically adopting an intentional interpretation of “avoidance behavior” for the metaphysically and morally hearty choosers we think we are; and then he substitutes “caused as inevitable effects” as a

definition of determinism. The second substitution may be more acceptable than the first.

Dennett is motivated to explain how free will could naturally evolve because he believes that the “false belief” that free will is impossible in a causally determined world is the driving force behind most resistance to materialism generally and to neo-Darwinism in particular. (p.15) On the contrary, Dennett insists: “Naturalism is no enemy of free will; it provides a positive account of free will,” one free of superstition and panicky metaphysics. (p.16) And then comes the confession in small print, overlooked by some: “I can’t deny that tradition assigns properties to free will that my variety lacks. So much the worse for tradition, I say.” (p. 225)

When Dennett complains that our use of exaggerated definitions of free will and determination causes problems for empirical theorizing, we wonder this: does he have a genuine concern for morality, or is it science he really cares about? His answer, that “we are evolved animals without souls but with free will” is ambiguous in this regard.

Dennett thinks of himself as updating David Hume’s laudatory attempts to make philosophy pay attention to science. Specifically, Dennett adds into the philosophical conversation facts of brain science and models of evolution. By doing so he causes us to rethink the meaning of choice, the value of morality, and how brains can sponsor minds how “nature has evolved choice machines.”

The tenor of Dennett’s writing can be traced to the influence of his Oxford teacher, Gilbert Ryle, who famously attacked Cartesian mind-body dualism in *The Concept of Mind*, dismissing its view of the self as “a ghost in the machine.” Dennett is concerned with debunking the ancient Greek belief in an immortal Soul without getting rid of the Self which possesses agency sufficient to create a personal “choice machine” capable of freely adopting identities and ideologies, not only able to invent action by intention. Most of Dennett’s books viciously bash the Cartesian inheritors of antiscientific beliefs.

In his earlier books Dennett has come off as an evangelical scientist who is out to slay superstitious fools by “spreading the acid of Darwinian thought” everywhere. His presumption that his readers are ignorant and superstitious colors his rhetoric. He has, to be sure, softened his attack here a bit; no longer does he ridicule Cartesians for the “skyhooks” on which their ideas hang. (But see pages 183-184 for new name-calling; he couldn’t completely resist.)

Dennett's claims about the phenomenological contents of consciousness are less controversial than his claims about their roles in constructing consciousness in how this content constructs its own context. His desire to see evolutionary frameworks and methods applied to every issue is not so controversial. His strategy makes systematic use of Brian Skyrms's work in *The Evolution of the Social Contract* (1996). But his extension of evolutionary techniques to include multi-level selection theory, the "intentional stance" and memes, are highly debated methods on which to rely for an account not only of biology but, as he needs, of culture too. Here is where danger lurks, according to his cultural critics.

In *Brain Storm* (1998), a novel by Richard Dooling, which alludes to Dennett's *Brainstorms* the author has Rachel Palmquist, an amoral, adulterous neuroscientist console her partner in sin (or maybe herself) by saying that humans do not have free will. (p. 228) She reports that in *Consciousness Explained*, Dan Dennett uses the cartoon analogy of Casper the Friendly Ghost to disparage belief in the soul and in the free power of will that is supposed by some to reside therein. This has peeved Dan. He intends to set the record straight in *Freedom Evolves*. A soul, no; free will, yes.

Dennett points out that Dooling gets his point dead wrong. In this work Dennett reiterates that free will is not a fiction (that's on page 222; but see elsewhere). Dennett says that he has "finally come to realize that many people like their confusion" about his issue. It's their cop-out. But two pages later (p. 224) he endorses Daniel Wegner's comment in *The Illusion of Consciousness* (2002) that "conscious will may be an illusion, but responsible moral action is quite real." Notice the creep between Dennett's two pronouncements. This sounds like a shell game to some—a bait and switch. Who likes confusion now?

And then Tom Wolf piles on. In *Hooking Up* (2000) Wolf lumps Dennett together with E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, and John Maynard Smith as wild-eyed "Darwinian fundamentalist" who have walked over the edge. They have wandered beyond the pale. (Stephen J. Gould and Leon Kass throw the same stones in *The New York Review of Books*, (December 6, 1997, and August 23, 1998, respectively). The critics claim that in their earnest attempts to lead us away from one superstition, these bad boys lead us right into another—the belief that we have no free will, thus no morality and no humanity.

Of course our lovable mavericks deny the charge. Dennett does so explicitly in *Freedom Evolves* (p. 97) But they waffle. They will not unambiguously state whether free will exists only as an illusion (even illusions are real, they say, in one sense of the word; and useful fictions can be well, useful). They point to concepts like those of "noble gas," or an absolutely straight line, as examples. In *Freedom Evolves*, Dennett makes much use of ideas spread throughout David Wegner's *The Illusion of Consciousness*; and this makes people suspicious. But here we will not stoop to convict on the basis of guilt by association

Dennett, in his defense, says that whether free will is real or illusory depends on what you mean by "free will." As an aside he points out that, in either case, free will (when regarded as harm-avoiding behavior) could have survival value—reproductive consequences. But what we want to know is: can harm-avoiding capacity be free enough to make us responsible for what we do, responsible enough that we might come to feel bad about ourselves as the price of, hopefully more often, feeling good about ourselves? We want buck-stopping responsibility. And that requires "ownership" of our actions and attitudes. The measure of our bad-avoiding success is whether we freely chose the good. Freedom is not, as Dennett claims, merely "the capacity to achieve what is of value in a range of circumstances." Thermostats do that. What thermostats don't do is "own" the values they seek.

As one critic put it; to capture our humanity Dennett must account for more freedom than that of a chemically switched cell, a photographically responsive flower, or a clever rat. Even more freedom than possessed by smart dogs or chimps is involved in moral freedom—in ethical praising and blaming. Dennett's evolutionary psychology is not enough to account for moral freedom.

Behaviorism and neuroscience do not really eat away at the philosophical estate, as Dennett claims, because they do not take seriously Kant's arguments that to treat oneself as a rational agent (not just as a cognitive creature) one must assume that one's reason has a practical application or, equivalently, that one has a will. But one cannot assume a rational will in oneself without already presupposing "the idea of freedom," the free endorsement of warranted beliefs, including beliefs about one's own nature. So, to regard oneself as acting (not merely behaving) requires the actor to presume his or her freely chosen rational endorsement of beliefs, values, and actions. Morally accountable freedom is the form of the thought of oneself as a practically rational agent. If one were not practically rational, what would be the point of Dennett's worry—his book?

Although some reviewers of Dennett's past books regard him as a good writer, I find his writing problematic. First of all, his writing streams nicely, only to suddenly clot. He moves from small sections of breezy explanations full of homely metaphors and bizarre case studies—all designed to boost the intuitions of lay people—into close cut and trust with critics or into dense technical argumentation for readers of philosophical journals. Dennett himself points to an architectural structure in *Freedom Evolves* whereby the first chapters are meant for the preparation of amateurs and the second five chapters are offered up for the edification of professionals. For more than one reason I found the experience of the text jerky.

Dennett clutters his lecture in *Freedom Evolves* with long asides, explaining how altruistic behavior can become an evolutionary stable strategy for some organisms, or with compact recaps of what he argued in other of his books and fighting with their critics, or with a gushing over some new scientific report he's sure you haven't heard of yet. He fights flab whenever he finds it, even if it is beside the point. Absorbing his scatter-shot content, dealing with his in-your-face rhetoric, and following his bait and switch tactics presents a challenge for Dennett's readers. The confusion, the attitude, the tricks—all these will keep readers on their toes. Whether they are persuaded is another matter.

Dennett gets his idea to reduce “free choice” to “fate-avoiding behavior” from John Conway's computer simulated “Games of Life” developed in the 1960s (see W. Poundstone, *The Recursive Universe*, 1985). The capacity to avoid fate has been evolving for billions of years, Dennett reminds us. Through the operation of natural selection organisms evolve greater degrees of fate-avoiding freedom. A crude kind of fate-avoiding is already programmed into primitive organisms as a chemical switch that responds to danger. Sophisticated fate-avoiders operate with internal “hypothesis-considering” strategies; they take up an “intentional stance” toward themselves and others.

Primitive fate-avoiders are programmed with a single, direct way to avoid harmful effects of causes. Sophisticated choosers, on the other hand, can invent novel ways to avoid the usual effects of causes. There is no conflict, Dennett points out, between being an inventor of fate-avoiding strategies and the existence of determined causes of effects (which may or may not be avoided). Primitive “situation-action machines” have genetically programmed simple rules: “When P happens, do Y in order to avoid its usual consequences.” Sophisticated “choice-machines,” however have

memetically learned hypothetical design strategies: “Would X, Y or Z best avoid an otherwise bad fate in this situation?” Such a reflective selection of a response to determined causes assumes a value posited for “best” and a prediction of the consequences of X, Y, and Z, among other things.

Determinism is usually defined as the thesis that “there is at any time exactly one physically possible future.” (Peter van Inwagen, “An Essay on Free Will,” 1983) This follows tradition. In 1814, the French physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace gave us our common image of determinism in what we now call “Laplace’s Demon” an all-knowing mind who when given a complete physical snapshot of the state of the universe (showing the exact location, velocity, and direction of every particle) could by use of the laws of science, plot everything that happens in the future, for eternity. “Nothing would be uncertain for this Intelligence: the past and the future would be present to its eyes” (Laplace, “A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities.” Note well, however, that this vision did not incorporate effect-avoiders.

The traditional, misleading notion of determinism is all over the place, even in the mouths of characters in contemporary novels like Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973): “You had taken on a greater and more harmful illusion. The illusion of control. That A could do B. But that was false. Completely. No one can do anything. Things only happen.” (p. 34)

On the contrary, says Dennett. An effect can have several causes, and often it is the case that typical effects can be avoided. It depends on the nature of that which would suffer or enjoy the effects. Determinism is about sufficient causation, not about necessary effects. (p. 83) When fate-avoiding behaviors are over-determined (i.e., have a variety of causes) and sufficient causation does not lead to its typical effects because they were avoided, freedom has been exercised.

One well-done argument in *Freedom Evolves* is Dennett’s explanation (pp. 108-122) of why the attempt to account for free will in the mind by attributing it to quantum uncertainties (of events in the brain’s electrical and hydraulic systems) will not work. Here he bashes Robert Kane in the head (*The Significance of Free Will*, 1996; who follows Roger Penrose in *Shadows of the Mind*, 1994).

Freedom requires intervention (fate-avoiding). One cannot intervene what cannot be predicted. We cannot avoid what we cannot predict. That which is predictable is a product of statistically uniform causes. Therefore,

consciously-chosen avoidance strategies depend on determinism, not on randomness. Luck, perhaps. But not randomness. A roulette wheel in our heads does not make us rational or free; it does not make us subject to being held morality accountable for our choices.

At the micro-level, quantum effects usually cancel each other out. And even when quantum uncertainties do lead to random neurophysiological events, they do not spawn free will. This only adds another causal factor—one that is random rather than nonrandom. A cause is still a cause even when unpredictable. The nature of the cause and its usual effect depends on whether the object which is subject to the effect can avoid it. This fact is independent of scientists. Not all things in the universe are fate-avoiders. Among those that are, there exist radical differences in degrees of freedom.

If our behaviors are completely unavoidable effects of other causes or they are completely random (i.e., not a response to anything), then we are not responsible for them—for their motives or consequences. Bottom line? Free will does not emerge from some “crack in the deterministic armor.” To make such a claim is to misuse Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Dennett suggests that those who are thoroughly grounded in using evolutionary reasoning will avoid these extreme definitions and will discover middle-ground, realistic definitions that naturalize both freedom and determinism. Free will must co-exist with (1) external determinism; (2) internal determinism; and (3) luck. (p. 158) But in this case, free will is incompatible with “hard determinism” (p. 97) and “radical libertarianism.” (p. 98)

According to Dennett, evolutionary neuroscience has not shown that there is no self, only that it is distributed (i.e., its pinpoint feel from a first-person point of view is an illusory result of neuro events). The self is spacious. (p.123) And (in a section called “A Self of One’s Own,” pp. 245-255) Dennett says that evolutionary neuroscience has not shown that there is no free will, only that its feeling of being a prime-mover is an illusory effect of a lag-time between brain activity and its registration in mental consciousness. (Dennett gets his “gap-theory” of will from Benjamin Libet’s *The Volitional Brain: Toward a Neuroscience of Free Will*, 1999).

The illusion of free will is compatible with real fate-avoiding behaviors, even “chosen” ones. The take-home message here? The facts that science describes and explains, the facts that technology implements, expand rather than shrink our freedom.

But both of these “facts”—the distributed but apparently pin-point self, and the lagging but apparently prime-mover will—are problematic for a regress-stopping account of self-forming actions, according to the “agent-causation” theory of selves. (See “Human Freedom and the Self,” Roderick Chisholm, p. 32, in *Free Will*, ed. by Gary Watson, for such an account.)

For Dennett, “the self” is merely a metaphor for the unity of distributed neural events, which create the illusion of a punctuated consciousness with powers of invention. We have real illusions of being agents. But we’re not agents. These illusions come from our genetically based and memetically nuanced ability to “take-up the intentional stance.” The pathology of autism seems to result from a systematic failure to take-up the intentional stance toward oneself as well as others. (More on the “intentional stance” in a moment.)

Dennett claims that both neurophysiology and behaviorist psychology reveal the Self and its Will to be illusory by-products of other activities. Daniel Wegner’s research disposes the self-as-object tradition; and Benjamin Libet’s research destroys the self-as-agent myth, according to Dennett. Real brains; fake selves and wills.

Earlier, in *The Content of Consciousness*, Dennett had characterized selves and their will power as “heads of minds” and “virtual captains” of their fate. In *Freedom Evolves* although not eliminated, our concepts of these phenomena are further “deflated”; now humans are “choices-machines” composed of “robotic parts.” (see Dennett’s *Philosophy*, ed. by D. Ross, A. Brook, and D. Thompson, 2000, pp. 369-370). Evolution has made it impossible for humans not to think of themselves as free agents, even though they’re not. We should adjust ourselves to both facts, says Dennett. Acknowledging all this will lead us to “a stronger, wiser doctrine of freedom.”

Dennett does not squarely address the issue of whether the twin illusions of the “object-self” and its “prime-mover” powers are results of direct or indirect trajectories through evolutionary design-space. In the past Dennett has joined the “Darwinian fundamentalists” in saying that the contents of consciousness are not mere by-products of Mother Nature seeking a solution to some other design problem. The impression left by *Freedom Evolves* is that evolving nature has directly “sought” free will as a sophisticated solution for avoiding fate. (For the opposition the “coincidentalists” see the famous paper by Steven J. Gould and Richard Lewontin for their critique of the “adaptationist program,” in “The Spandrels of San Marcos,” 1999.)

According to Dennett, there are three explanatory stances one can take toward phenomena: the physical stance, the design stance, or the intentional stance. (He ignores the moral stance.) From a view already oriented toward physical problems we can explain the structure and behavior of something in material and (statistically) mechanical terms. From an orientation toward design problems we can explain a subset of physical phenomena as genetically heritable, metabolic and sentient activity that solves functional problems of reproduction within trophic opportunities and constraints.

From the intentional stance we can explain a subset of living phenomena as engaging in intentional activities memetically heritable practices, reflectively, and freely endorsed—as if in conscious pursuit of its “own” goals.

Just how the fate-avoidance behaviors of squirrels historically emerged naturally out of the earlier absence of such avoidance behavior in rocks is not explained. Also not explained is the transition to the fate-avoiding behavior of humans from the earlier absence of agency in chickens. (For an attempt to answer these questions see John Maynard Smith and Eors Szathmary, *The Major Transitions in Evolution*, 1995.) The intentional stance reveals illusory experience in humans, Dennett claims, but the illusions themselves are real. Our sense of an object-self with inventive power (even though there is no such self or power) is a real feeling.

The three nested kinds of explanation, ordered by emergently different kinds of object, lead to an ordered set of tasks. First, describe behavior as conscious goal seeking. Second, eliminate the intentional reference and explain the same behavior as naturally selected design solutions given internal and external ecological constraints and opportunities. Third, eliminate those teleological references and explain the same behavior as materially and mechanically possible in the brain and its environments.

The intentional stance has the great advantage of simplicity. Instead of worrying about thousands of casual relations (the concern of the physical stance) or hundreds of functional rules and their qualifiers (the concern of the design stance), all we have to notice is a single goal, desire, or belief that motivates a behavior.

But this simplicity comes at a cost. The assumptions are costly: we must assume minds, not merely brains. We have to assume mental goals (beliefs that X is valuable and worth pursuing). We have to assume mental means

(motivations and calculations for getting X). Mental values, desires, and strategies must be assumed or else the intentional stance does not get off the ground; we cannot turn around and use the intentional stance (goals) to test its own presuppositions (goals). The simplicity of the intentional stance is purchased at the cost of substantial assumptions that can only be posited. The intentional stance itself must be freely adopted as rational if it is to be a legitimate filter for our observation and explanation.

Just what is the epistemological status of a metaphysical claim that free will is a felt illusion? If the epistemological claim is warranted only if freely endorsed upon reflection, can that freedom be rational if the freedom exercised while endorsing the illusory status of free will is itself illusory? What is the ontological status of an illusory source of fate-avoiding behavior? Bewildered? Now I understand Dennett's recent admission to critics that his ontological intuitions about intentional capacities are "in happy disarray." (*Dennett's Philosophy*, 2002) Dennett's "deflation" of the "folk psychology" of the cheaper classes is a bust. His illusions bear little metaphysical or moral weight.

The eagerness with which some scientists and philosophers go after the soul, freedom of will, and God in order to show their nonexistence, betrays their deep misunderstanding of symbolic phenomena—of positing ideal measures of value. All three concepts, Soul, Will, and God, circle around value, not being. They are not purported to be things to be discovered as existing or not existing (as real or illusory); but rather they are values (goals) to be created or killed.

This is the same point that shallow readers of Nietzsche miss. His madman does not discover the nonexistence of God, but rather he declares that a "murder" has taken place that value, not being, has been destroyed. Dennett might understand neuro-physiology without correctly understanding its implications for being human. This would be so if our humanity, though evolved, is invented by certain kind of regard—a "moral stance" rather than by chemicals. If so, what we have here with Dennett's new book may be a murder, not a scientific discovery. Dennett claims to have discovered that morally free will—as necessary to secular ethics as it is to religious ethics is missing. But in fact, he killed it.