Reviews:

Elbow Room: Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting. By Daniel C. Dennett. Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press. 1984.

This is a book about free will, or, more precisely, about the philosophical "problem" of free will. Dennett believes that this problem is largely the making of the philosophers who have thought about free will. Overly simplified analogies, created by the "intuition pumps" of these philosophers, have led to a set of worries and confusions which together constitute the problem. When these analogies are carefully examined, the worries and confusions dissolve. When this dissolution is achieved, little if anything of the problem remains, although the potential for new variations on the anxiety-causing intuitions is abiding. Dennett allows, however, that when all the confusion has been stripped away there may remain a substantive philosophical issue.

The anxieties and worries which generate the free will problem arise because rejecting free will seems to threaten many things we hold dear: our sense of self-esteem, human dignity, moral responsibility, and human aspirations. The varieties of free will worth wanting are those connected with these values. Once confusions generated by oversimplified analogies are seen for what they are, we can be comfortable with a naturalistic, scientific account of human beings within which a compatibilist, if not determinist, account of free will is at home. Mysterious, metaphysical doctrines about agent causality or contra-causal freedom can be safely discarded without threat to the varieties of free will worth wanting.

The main technique Dennett uses for exposing the confusions and unwarranted fears generated by philosophers' oversimplified intuitions and analogies is his ample and nuanced presentation of relevant parts of a naturalistic, scientific account of human beings. Dennett's development of this account comprises much of the argumentation in the book. It is a witty, informed, and insightful—though at times speculative and sketchy—discussion of how a sophisticated, evolutionary explanation of human beings accounts for such things as practical reason, self-control, agency and deliberation.

This discussion is complemented by creative analyses of key notions in the free will discussion—concepts like control and avoidance. The presentation of the naturalistic view of human beings together with

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these analyses sets the stage for Dennett's argument against what he calls the "could have done otherwise principle," and for his compatibilist interpretation of moral responsibility.

Dennett's case is not easily summarized, because its power depends precisely on its nuance and detail. It seems to me that he succeeds in showing that the naturalistic story about human beings does not present the threat to human dignity which the oversimplified intuitions of philosophers might suggest. Such bugbears and bogeymen as the invisible jailer, the nefarious neurosurgeon, and the cosmic child whose toys we are, while truly fearful possibilities, are not generated by a properly nuanced naturalistic story. Quite the contrary: such a story has the resources to keep them and all their kin in their proper place— to reveal them as conjured-into-being oversimplified models of determinism.

What is less compelling in Dennett's argument is his formulation of the free will problem, and his handling of some of the key contentions of defenders of the incompatibilist conception of free will.

For, when the naturalistic, compatibilist story has been told in all its persuasive detail, and the dissolution of confusion and exorcism of bugbears thoroughly executed, those inclined toward incompatibilism, thus enlightened, are likely to remain uneasy. Their worries and anxieties may well be calmed, but their concern that Dennett's story is true will remain. For incompatibilists, whatever fears may motivate their concern, believe that the issue of free will is not simply a question of defending values they cherish, but of the way human beings are. Their arguments are not of the form: if we deny free will, then we lose things we cherish, so let's not deny it. They are of the form: the data of human experience and their analysis require us to affirm free will, so it is unreasonable not to affirm it. The concern, in short, is not with the free will we want, but with the free will we are required by the data, their analyses, and the rules of inquiry to affirm. Dennett has not shown that all the premises in arguments of this kind are in fact accepted only because of unwarranted fears, nor has he shown that a naturalistic, compatibilist account sufficiently covers the data so as to make gratuitous the inference to free will.

Dennett's dismissal of Chisholm's view on agent causality is a case in point. Chisholm maintains that if human beings are responsible, then when a human acts, he or she is a prime mover unmoved. "In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen, and nothing—or no one—causes us to cause those events to happen." (p. 76) Dennett thinks that this is "obscure and panicky metaphysics." But he recognizes that if this judgment is to be more than name calling, he must provide a naturalistic account which not only explains agency but reveals the illusory character of the intuitions supporting Chisholm's "vision".

Dennett maintains that Chisholm's vision of the self is a sort of cognitive illusion caused by two factors. The first of these is that in agency there is something like an illusion of scale. There is a magni-

fication of effects by the nervous system. The switches which control output factors of the person—such factors as our mouths, arms and legs—use very little input energy in controlling processes which expend observably dramatic amounts of energy. The second factor causing the cognitive illusion is the fact that much of the processing of information is invisible. "We see the dramatic effects leaving; we don't see the causes entering; we are tempted by the hypothesis that there are no causes." (p. 77) Further, these causal paths are no less invisible to introspection than to an outside observer. Dennett goes on:

> Are decisions voluntary? Or are they things that happen to us? From some fleeting vantage points they seem to be the preeminently voluntary moves in our lives, the instants at which we exercise our agency to the fullest. But those same decisions can also be seen to be strangely out of our control. We have to wait to see how we are going to decide something, and when we do decide, our decision bubbles up to consciousness from we know not where. We do not witness it being *made*; we witness its *arrival*. (p. 78)

Of course, incompatibilists believe that one cannot predict even one's own free choices before one makes them. Furthermore, there may well be "decisions" of the kind Dennett describes here. But surely these are not the kind of decisions on which claims about agent causality are based. These decisions are not experienced as simply the arrival of settled state of mind and will in the absence of awareness of what caused the termination of the earlier state of irresolution. They are experienced as the person's own settling of the issue, as one's settling the matter by making a choice of one over other possibilities. Thus, while one's experience includes the negative element of not being aware that anything else settled one's decision except one's own choice, this negative element is not simple ignorance of the causes: one experiences one's decision as the cause.

Nowhere in the book could I find a recognition of this positive aspect of the experience of choosing, or even an acknowledgement that incompatibilists think there is such a component to their experience. There is only the reference, quoted in the above passage, to what appears from certain fleeting vantage points. Dennett discusses cases where it is unclear whether one actually made a decision, and cases where one cannot pinpoint the time at which one's mind became settled. (p. 80) He also discusses a smoker who should but does not quit; this person's behavior can be explained in one of only two ways: as caused either by self-deception or by weakness of will. (p. 106) No doubt there are cases like these, but there also appear to be cases in which the experience is as I have suggested, and these are the cases on which claims about agent causality are based.

Thus, there is, or seems to be, an awareness of oneself as active which is not a cognitive illusion, not simply an exploiting of a cogni-

tive vacuum by filling it in with a magical, mysterious, active self. (p. 79)

Of course, this experience will have to be treated as like an illusion by the naturalist. But Dennett has not given even a hint of how what seems to be part of experience is really the creation of a diagnosable illusion. But if this aspect of the experience is not a diagnosable illusion, but must still be dismissed as illusory, Dennett's conception of the free will problem is in trouble. Here is something which he does not want, but seems to be given in experience—something which should continue to trouble one who accepts Dennett's naturalism even after all the bugbears have been exorcised. For the naturalistic compatibilist must admit that his account requires that a common part of the experience of many people must be dismissed as illusory just because it conflicts with the story. The substantive philosophical issue about how to deal with certain difficult data remains.

Dennett seems to recognize that there is a substantive philosophical issue concerning what he calls "the could have done otherwise principle," the proposition that one is free and responsible only if one could have done otherwise. For he argues that this proposition is false. But even here Dennett regards his own distinctive contribution to the discussion to be the further point that nobody is really interested in the incompatibilists' sense of "could have done otherwise;" the freedom connected with this notion is, presumably, not among the varieties worth wanting.

Dennett thinks there are clear counter-examples to the could-have-done-otherwise principle. One of Frankfort's examples of over-determination is presented and endorsed, but with the recognition that the incompatibilist can "try for a patch," and evade the force of the example. The example is of a person who decides to do something, but could not have done otherwise because, had the person chosen not to do it, another agent would have caused him or her to do it anyway.

It seems to me, however, that the incompatibilist response to this example is not evasive tinkering. The person in question may not have been able to *do* otherwise, but he or she could have *chosen* otherwise, as the example admits. It is this possibility of choosing otherwise to which the incompatibilist is committed.

Dennett's own examples fare no better. He presents the case of Luther's famous statement: "Here I stand. I can do no other." As Dennett notes, Luther was not trying to duck responsibilities. Quite the opposite.

But Luther's statement is ambiguous. Did he mean to express his sense of obligation to take the stand he took? If so, perhaps he could have done otherwise in the relevant sense. Or did he mean that, having committed himself as he did, he was resolute in the choice he made? Or did he mean that he never had a choice to make concerning the matter of his religious stance? If this last sense is clearly distinguished from the others, and is taken to be Luther's meaning, then it

is not so clear that either he or we would hold him morally responsible for the stance he took.

Similar observations apply to Dennett's other examples: surely there are people for whom some actions are just out of the question—not live options. And this is often to their credit. Dennett is correct in thinking that part of the point of moral education is to rule out—to render unthinkable—some possible actions. But this says nothing about people who do face options which they would not face were they better educated or integrated. For them rejecting such temptations is doing good when they could have done otherwise, and that is to their moral credit. More important, Dennett has not shown that we would regard as morally praiseworthy persons who could not have done other than the good they did, if these persons never made a choice, for example, to accept and internalize the moral education which ruled out the bad alternative.

Dennett's attempt to show that the incompatibilist account of the could-have-done-otherwise principle is not anything people are interested in, has difficulties like those involved in his rejection of agent causality. He argues that no one could know that one could have done otherwise in the incompatibilist sense, and that this should be surprising because the information involved is taken to be so humanly significant. (pp. 135-136)

He supposes that in order to know that one could have done otherwise, one must be able to compare two situations which are exactly the same. Since no two situations in a person's life are exactly the same, it is impossible to know that one could have done otherwise. (p. 136)

But the incompatibilist need not accept Dennett's supposition. The meaning of "could have done otherwise" is instantiated in a single choice situation: one faces options and settles the matter by one's own choice. Since the choice is free, one can choose either option, and after the fact can correctly say that one could have chosen otherwise.

Of course, in a given case, a person may be mistaken in thinking that a choice was free. Some factor which determined the choice might come to light after the fact, or careful consideration of the experience itself might reveal some determining factor. On the basis of this kind of reflection people can have considerable confidence that in a given situation they could or could not have done otherwise. Only the acceptance of a naturalistic account of human agency can justify general skepticism about the results of such inquiry.

Dennett goes on to argue that even if we could know whether one could have done otherwise, by way of a divine revelation perhaps, that information would be useless. For knowing that one could have done otherwise in a given situation would not tell us anything about the person's character or anything useful for future planning. (pp. 137-138)

But this information would tell us something important from the incompatibilist point of view: that the person was responsible in a full

and distinctive sense for his or her action. That surely is relevant to one's willingness to praise or to punish in the incompatibilist understanding of these activities—an understanding not rendered empty by the fact that Dennett can provide an alternative account of moral responsibility. Further, from the incompatibilist point of view a person's free choices are not irrelevant to the estimation of the person's character. Choices are the key factors which establish a person's moral character and identity.

In short, Dennett's book is a useful propaedeutic to the free will problem. But not more than that. Incompatibilist resistance to a naturalist account of human beings is not simply a tissue of anxieties which dissolve when oversimplifications are unmasked. Substantive philosophical issues remain even when the naturalistic, compatibilist account is fully spelled out. Dennett fails to recognize the extent to which these issues remain because he does not take sufficient account of the data from which the incompatibilist account begins. This same oversight flaws his efforts to resolve the substantive issues he does recognize.

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