



Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting

Daniel C. Dennett

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Anyone who has wondered if free will is just an illusion or has asked 'could I have chosen otherwise?' after performing some rash deed will find this book an absorbing discussion of an endlessly fascinating subject. Daniel Dennett, whose previous books include "Brainstorms" and (with Douglas Hofstadter) "The Mind's I," tackles the free will problem in a highly original and witty manner, drawing on the theories and concepts of several fields usually ignored by philosophers; not just physics and evolutionary biology, but engineering, automata theory, and artificial intelligence.

In "Elbow Room," Dennett shows how the classical formulations of the problem in philosophy depend on misuses of imagination, and he disentangles the philosophical problems of real interest from the "family of anxieties" they get enmeshed in - imaginary agents, bogeymen, and dire prospects that seem to threaten our freedom. Putting sociobiology in its rightful place, he concludes that we can have free will and science too. "Elbow Room" begins by showing how we can be "moved by reasons" without being exempt from physical causation. It goes on to analyze concepts of control and self-control-concepts often skimped by philosophers but which are central to the questions of free will and determinism. A chapter on "self-made selves" discusses the idea of self or agent to see how it can be kept from disappearing under the onslaught of science. Dennett then sees what can be made of the notion of acting under the idea of freedom does the elbow room we think we have really exist? What is an opportunity, and how can anything in our futures be "up to us"? He investigates the meaning of "can" and "could have done otherwise," and asks why we want free will in the first place. We are wise, Dennett notes, to want free will, but that in itself raises a host of questions about responsibility. In a final chapter, he takes up the problem of how anyone can ever be guilty, and what the rationale is for holding people responsible and even, on occasion, punishing them.

"Elbow Room" is an expanded version of the John Locke Lectures which Dennett gave at Oxford University in 1983.

Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting Details

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From Reader Review Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting for online ebook

Keith Swenson says

I am a big fan of Dan Dennett. Free will is a very difficult topic to explain and this is a very careful, thoughtful treatment of the subject. I started to write a detailed summary of the book, but decided cut to the basics: This was an early book of his on the topic of consciousness and free will, and his later books are much better. You can see in this book the seeds of ideas that he will later present in "Consciousness Explained." Most everything in this book is explained better in that one.

The age old question of free will. Dennett approach the problem as a sculptor would a piece of granite. He wants to work all our the edges, get a very rough idea, before adding detail and ultimately polishing the theory.

He start with an entire chapter on why we don't want to think about free will. It seems clear that the idea of free will is a very dear to us. We simply can't be disinterested, there is some nagging feeling that makes us want to avoid the subject like a really bad smell. He outlines a set of bugbears:

- (1) Invisible Jailer: If we have not free will, then we might be in jail
- (2) Nefarious Neurosurgeon: or someone might be able to control us
- (3) Cosmic Child Toys: or we might be toys to gods
- (4) Malevolent Mindreader: or we might be predictable and therefor unable to win
- (5) Spheixishness: we might be just acting according to program
- (6) Disappear self: if we look to hard we might find there is no one home
- (7) Dread Secret: finding out the truth might ruin your life

The "problem" with free will, is all of the fears embodied above.

There is an interesting part about body english -- those movements that you do that can't possibly have effect, but you do them anyway, as if superstitiously. Launching the bowling ball and then dancing or wheeling as if to control the ball down the alley. However there is an alternative: don't loop up too soon after hitting a golf ball. The practice of keeping your head down AFTER hitting the ball still can have an effect how you behave before hitting it. Which is it: pointless or important?

He lists a number of intuition pumps:

- (1) Plato's cave
- (2) Quine's Gavagai
- (3) Goodman's grue-bleen puzzle
- (4) Rawl's original position
- (5) Farrell's bat
- (6) Putnam's twin earth
- (7) Searle's chinese room

What we are left with is the "Compatibilist" view of free will, which always feels like merely shifting the definition of the terms. The compatibilist believe that we make all the choices that we want to make, and that those choices are determined by our history. You might say: your actions are determined by your needs and

desires, but your needs and desires are determined by your experience, and therefore your actions are determined. But STILL you exercise free will because that IS your free will to follow your needs and desires.

This argument leaves most traditionalists unsatisfied. "I don't FEEL like my actions are determined. I can decide what I want to do any moment." Of course you can, but you always decide what you think is the best or most appropriate thing to do, which at the end of the day is determined for you.

The most important part of this discussion is really exposing the "libertarian free will" as unrealistic illusive fantasy. You would never want to live a life where you could arbitrarily make any choice at any moment without regard to your needs and desires. You really don't want to ride in a taxi where the driver had the free will to just drive off a cliff or into a wall at any moment. We would never want the kind of free will that allow you to suddenly decide to put arsenic into the dinner you are making, or to arbitrarily decide to throw your child from a building. we most certainly do not want to make completely arbitrary and capricious actions.

It turns out that free will means simply that your actions are guided by YOUR needs and desires, and they are NOT guided by someone else's desired. Free will is denied when you are locked up and prevented from some external reason to do what you desire. What we really mean by free will is not that we can take any ARBITRARY action at any moment, but that we are not FORCED to take an action different than what we want. It really has nothing to do with determinism.

Thus, having your own actions determined by your own needs and desires is actually the kind of free will that you want. That is the point of this book. I assure you, if you are not already acquainted with these ideas, you will on first reading reject them. As most people will reject the superficial description of the book. But further study is warranted, and Dennett has adequately organized this concept. However, as I said earlier, I would recommend his later, larger book: Consciousness Explained as it covers many of these same topics.

Chris says

Read it in college. Reading it again. He has a terrific beard.

John says

This book should be called Varieties of Determinism Worth Wanting, or Varieties of Determinism Worth Having the Illusion that We Want, But are Incapable of Because Everything is Pre-ordained, Anyway.

Whatever the title, this book doesn't describe any credible model of freedom.

Adam says

Do we have free will? Does the book really answer this question? Through 98% of the book I was on board with Daniel Dennett. So much so that I found his ideas a bit pointless. Determinism is true. There's no free

will! It seems more like a takedown of any argument FOR free will. It seems to frequently deviate away from that idea into tangents that don't really seem related but it actually seems like he was making a case for free will. Often not really stating it, but ultimately railing against the "free will is an illusion" crowd and suggesting compatibilism. I'm not really convinced.

Based on the fact that we seem to agree with all of the premises, I don't think we fundamentally disagree on how the universe works or how causality works. Dennett clearly believes in determinism. He clearly believes we are comparable to meat robots of some kind. He simply feels that the elaborateness of our decision making is something which we should call free will. Is it? This almost seems like a semantic disagreement.

When I disagree with someone about free will it's usually one of two camps. The first is a person who hasn't really thought about what determinism means and assumes we aren't bound by it. The second is a person who does, and understands the causal fabric of the universe, but still thinks there is room for free will.

You couldn't have done it another way. It's that simple. If you don't change the original conditions, the result is the same. Practically this has little bearing on us, as we are never the same person twice, so we learn from our mistakes and correct our behaviour. So what? Determinism is still true and to me it is incompatible with what I consider to be free will.

Daniel Dennett appears to be making a mountain of arguments against free will, and somehow comes to the conclusion that it is a real thing. Okay.

Aldo Ojeda says

I was interested in this book, written in 1984, just one year before the Libet experiment that would be quoted from there on in the discussion of free will (Dennett's own words reading foreboding: "Modern science isn't *making* determinism true, even if it is discovering this fact, so things aren't going to get worse, unless it is believing in determinism rather than determinism itself that creates the catastrophe.") The whole text isn't as clear as some later works by the author. Most arguments are hidden within examples and metaphors (or, as Dennett calls them, *intuition pumps*) and many direct quotes by various other authors.

I was warned by Harris on the position of Dennett, but didn't want to make myself an opinion until I read it myself. But alas, I could not agree with the last few pages of *Elbow Room*. He ended up saying "free will doesn't exist" and adding a huge "BUT..." at the end in what appears a step backwards. Still, I'm now going to read *Freedom Evolves*, to see how the discussion continues in a post-Libet epistemological world.

Jeff says

I take the debate about free will very seriously. It's one of the few areas where I think a common-sense understanding (that we all have it) is wrong, and a philosophical dissection of the concept will do a lot of good. Many books on the subject, though, are unbearably dry and bog down in technical discussions that eventually bore even tech-y philosophers like myself. This one doesn't. It reaches a conclusion that I am in total agreement with, and it does so without "cheating" by avoiding any of the complex issues along the way. At the same time, the book remains readable throughout, Dennett consistently favoring the use of examples and analogies that are as catchy and memorable as they are illuminating. I think it is no accident that Dennett

is one of the most celebrated philosophers of our time, and this book makes clear why. An oldie (from the mid 80's), but a goodie.

Tien Manh says

Dennett promotes (his) version of compatibilism.

Essentially, the kind of "free will" where we "could have done otherwise" is only of esoteric metaphysical interest. As agents in the observable universe, of course we are affected by our environments, of course our past affects every single decision we make in the present, and of course a "Laplacean demon" could theoretically "compute" every possible state of the universe. But of what use would such a theoretical possibility be?

In order for us to make "sense" of the world, to survive and reproduce in it, we must make models, approximations, and get on with heuristics. The perfectly rational being is impossible, since "theoretically" it is always optimal to deliberate upon deliberations upon deliberations...but "real" creatures have time and computational constraints. We don't have universe upon universes of neurons to compute how electrons in the nearest galaxy affects our decision whether to eat pizza today. So we make approximations of others, and of ourselves, and introduce concepts such as "reason", "self", "responsibility", "morality", "control" and "meaning" as helpful social and personal compasses. Of course those constructs, in the strictest sense, aren't "real", but who cares?

An interesting question is posed towards the end: if humans are "irrational", how can anyone dream of a "rational" creature? How will this creature have a "freer will" than us? Wouldn't it just be a more computationally complex entity? How complex does it have to be to have "done otherwise"?

I have my stance on hard determinism, but Dennett's work is still down-to-earth and very much worth the read. Again, not easy read, and some digressions in arcane philosophy that one might be tempted to skip.

Mike says

This is an excellent little series of essays on free will which only occasionally gets bogged down in "philosophese". Dennett very deftly takes on the fears based on the sneaking suspicion that we don't actually have "free will" by first asserting that we should buck up and not scare ourselves too much with deterministic bugbears. Then he makes the case that determinism could very much feel similar to free will. Then he points out that when many people talk about having even "free-er" will than we already seemingly have, they are talking about the ability to make contradictory choices or disobey other physical laws. He also considers the asymptotic case of using free will to make the best possible choices based on the most (and most relevant) information, and points out that we - tragically - don't have time for all of that nonsense in making our day to day choices.

In the end, his conclusion seems to be that of course we have free will, in that we seem to have free will in all of the ways that matter, and even if we don't we wouldn't know it, so quit worrying about it. A thoroughly humanistic and useful conclusion, and an enjoyable read.

Jimmy says

Determinism does not mean that our fate was determined before we were born. But much of what happens to us in a lifetime is certainly influenced by that. Determinism is not fatalism. For someone to say, "It does not matter what I do, whatever is meant to happen will happen," is quite absurd. And yet to say we have free will and that I can do whatever I want to do, is also absurd.

For me understanding determinism, I think of this instant of my life on a straight line. The straight line is my past. It cannot be changed, as much as I would give anything to change some things. I ache to change them. But they are frozen in time. It is the next instant in my life line that is determined by all that went before. Those instants pile up.

Soren Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." I learn from my past and behave based on that learning. I am affected by environment, heredity, and chance.

I "feel" like I have free will, just like everyone else. In fact, I understand that I am wrong, that in reality I have no free will. But I cannot shake that "feeling" that I am a free person.

Kate says

On the pitfalls of premature verdicts of stupidity in the wasp, see Dawkins 1982, pp. 48-50.

True, much of these causes occur 'inside' us--is it better to be a hand puppet than a marionette?

Note that this "can" is Austin's frog at the bottom of the beer mug.

Now it is open for some genius of pessimism to discover for us some sort of contra-Darwinian patterns of motiveless malignancy which would permit us to reconceptualize our view of nature as a sort of Manichaean struggle between Mother Nature and the Evil One, but so far as I know, no such patterns have been seriously entertained.

"Les choses sont contre nous"--that is the aphoristic heart of Resistentialism.

An act in equilibrium withstands knowledge of its own causes.

See Dawkins 1976, pp. 82-83, on the conditions under which a poker face is an evolutionarily stable strategy.

They give you an answer every time you ask, and who cares if it's "right"?

Designing a wise and workable method of ignoring things has proven to be one of the deepest and most intractable problems in Artificial Intelligence.

Nobody can do. Things only happen.

"How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?"

The unexamined life may not be worth living, but the overexamined life is nothing to write home about either.

"After the temptation has been yielded to, the desiring 'I' will come to an end, but the conscience-stricken 'I' may endure to the end of life."

"Some souls one will never discover, unless one invents them first."

What it means to say a dog can bark is that one may not rely on its silence. These same deliberators, to whom barks are so important, may not care much just how a dog barks when it does. So such deliberators will for these purposes partition dogs as systems with a two-state degree of freedom: the barker is either ON or OFF.

Which direction gravity works in is never up to me.

Sartre sees the importance of this, and with his customary cool understatement defines a free agent as "a being who can realize a nihilating rupture with the world and with himself."

There is a difference between being optimally designed and being infallible.

Rory says

This is an very good and somewhat unusual analysis of the question of Free Will. One of his more purely philosophical works, Dennett breaks down the question of Free Will into several components and addresses these in turn. Although quite easy to follow, it is quite a dense work (much ground is covered over its 172 pages) and he does not describe the historical debate about Free Will (that is 2,500 years old) - so I would recommend that any reader familiarise themselves with the historical approaches to Determinism/Indeterminism, Compatibilism/Incompatibilism in order to get the most out of the book.

Although he never states his personal view explicitly, Dennett could be classed a Compatibilist in the Free Will discussion. His universe is a mechanistic one, if not entirely deterministic in the classical sense. (On this last point, I think he is just reluctant to commit, in light of quantum mechanics). Ultimately, it doesn't matter, as each of his arguments apply both to a determined or indeterminate universe). What Dennett is doing here is deconstructing the notion of what Free Will could possibly be and why it is of importance/relevance to us at all.

The first four chapters of 'Elbow Room' are excellent. Dennett is at his strongest when deconstructing popular myths - even held by many of his professional colleagues today - and puts these into plain language even the amateur philosopher. There is a wealth of Dennett's "intuition pumps" - thought experiments to get the reader thinking about issues that may have become over-familiar.

Unfortunately, where this book falls down is in the final three chapters, when he has to reconstruct his world view. Dennett's attempt to reconstruct a complete picture is not as convincing. I don't believe that this is due to an error in his thoughts - just that the argument is incomplete.

All in all, the strengths of this unusual look at Free Will outweigh the minor faults. (3.5 / 5)

Daniel Hageman says

Much more clear and focused than his later 'Freedom Evolves'. Probably recommend this to those new to the free will discussion who haven't yet familiarized themselves with compatibilism.

Rob, the Monk says

Interesting read, but difficult: Dennett writes for the student of Philosophy. Eminently accessible to a person willing to commit, but, as all philosophical writing, commitment it requires. He explores Free Will in terms of Determinism, that is, the proposal that Free Will as we think of it, is an illusion and that human beings as rational agents are as subject to causation as dominoes. It's an extremely uncomfortable idea for many people, and Dennett doesn't spend a great deal of time acclimating one. Best to get comfortable with the idea before Dennett sweeps you up in all the subsequent implications.

Billie Pritchett says

Dan Dennett's *Elbow Room* is pretty good. It's about free will, a perennial subject that's intriguing for any person who's ever stopped to wonder if the regularities of the universe mean that we're all somehow less free. It may, at first blush, seem like a fool's errand to wonder about such things, or to even get into the mindset to see what the so-called problem is. But it basically comes down to this. We live in a world where God or Nature has inscribed laws on the way the world works. This goes all the way up from the movement of the planets all the way down to how the cells in your mother's uterus divided to make you. Not only do these laws show an astonishing regularity but they're never any different. Gravity always wins and cells during the reproductive process split. So the question arises: Where do we fit into all this? How is it I have control over my body and freedom to act as I please if I'm subject to the same laws that brought the world into being?

Dennett attempts to tackle these worries about whether or not we have free will little by little, looking at a particular fear, and then showing why we can dismiss it. Probably one of the most interesting to me, and one that I buy, is the "could have done otherwise" claim. What I mean is this. There's this feeling that we have that we could have done otherwise in the exact same situation. But the fact of the matter is that if our minds were in exactly the same state as that time, and we proceeded to act in the same way, it would be impossible, in the exact same situation to act differently than we did. The way out of this kind of dilemma, though, is to realize that we really want when we say that we could have the ability to do otherwise is just to say that in a *similar* situation, we could have acted differently, and we don't really care that it's the same. Well, the world offers us up similar situations to act differently all the time, and sometimes we make different decisions than we did. So no harm, no foul.

Maybe general audiences would like this book, maybe not. Dennett, I think, tries to write in an open inviting style for readers of all stripes but sometimes, maybe he gets bogged down in some technicalities. You be the judge.

Dave Peticolas says

What does it mean to have free will? Is free will incompatible with determinism? With indeterminism? What does it mean to control oneself? What does it mean to make a choice? Why do we want free will at all and what do we want when we want it?

Dennett examines these perennial philosophical problems and disposes of many of the "bugbears" which plague the often fear-riddled investigations into these topics. Dennett also develops answers, or at least the start of some answers, that embrace the possibility of determinism and evolution. Good as usual.
