

**COMPATIBILISM EVOLVES?:  
ON SOME VARIETIES OF DENNETT WORTH WANTING**

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**Abstract:** I examine the extent to which Dennett's account in *Freedom Evolves* might be construed as revisionist about free will or should instead be understood as a more traditional kind of compatibilism. I also consider Dennett's views about philosophical work on free agency and its relationship to scientific inquiry, and I argue that extant philosophical work is more relevant to scientific inquiry than Dennett's remarks may suggest.

Keywords: Dennett, compatibilism, free will, revisionism, science.

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Reading a book by Daniel Dennett is always enjoyable, and this is certainly true of *Freedom Evolves*.<sup>1</sup> All the usual rewards of Dennett's writing are present here: the sparkling prose, the memorable examples, and his characteristically witty way of describing the lay of the land. Dennett offers a broad-ranging account of how many ordinary features of agency are not threatened by determinism or by being embedded in a physical, causal system, and how these features might have evolved from much simpler systems. The project of the book is to provide "a unified, stable, empirically well-grounded coherent view of human free will" (13), where free will is real but "not a preexisting feature of our existence, like the law of gravity," and "not what tradition declares it to be: a God-like power to exempt oneself from the causal fabric of the physical world" (13).

Although there are many interesting aspects of the book that merit close examination, in this article I largely restrict my attention to two issues. First, I explore the extent to which Dennett might be construed as a revisionist about free will and whether we should instead understand him as a more traditional kind of compatibilist—albeit an explicitly Darwinian one. Second, I consider his views about philosophical work on free agency and its relationship to scientific inquiry. As a preface to discussing these issues, however, I begin with some remarks about Dennett's intended audience and its significance for how we are to construe the philosophical aims of the book.

<sup>1</sup> Dennett 2003. Unless otherwise noted, all citations are to this book.

## 1. Between Philosophy and Science

It seems to me that Dennett's book can be read in two different ways. On one reading, the book is not so much directed at philosophers who have disputed aspects of Dennett's earlier work on free will, or even philosophers who dispute his account of consciousness and the mind. Rather, the target audience seems to be an intelligent, perhaps scientifically minded audience of nonphilosophers, in particular those who are inclined to resist Dennett's brand of materialistic, Darwinian thinking.<sup>2</sup> The reason Dennett is concerned to provide an account of free will, especially to this latter group, is that he finds that "concern about free will is the driving force behind most of the resistance to materialism more generally and neo-Darwinism in particular" (15). Read this way, the aim of the book is to answer critics who think that Dennett—and others who share his commitment to materialism, Darwinism, and the like—are committed to the nonexistence of free will.<sup>3</sup>

Read in this fashion, a distinctive and important contribution of *Freedom Evolves* is that it provides tools for nonphilosophers to think about the nature of agency within the context of a naturalistically austere picture of the universe. If this audience—which may include many of our colleagues in departments of biology, neuroscience, cognitive science, and psychology—absorb the lessons of Dennett's account, he will have done important work in bridging the gap between philosophical accounts of free will and the sciences of the mind.<sup>4</sup>

A second way to read *Freedom Evolves* is as a substantive contribution to the ongoing discussion about agency and free will among professional philosophers. Read this way, there are a number of issues that will be of interest to professional philosophers. These include: (1) his distinctive accounts of possibility and causation (chapter 3), (2) the details of his discussions about the work of Robert Kane and Alfred Mele (chapters 4 and 9, respectively), (3) his principled avoidance of many of the main issues in the philosophical literature (including disputes about arguments for incompatibilism and alternative possibilities), and (4) whether his view is really a compatibilist view in the traditional sense or whether it is a revisionist view somewhere between traditional compatibilism and pessimistic forms of incompatibilism.

<sup>2</sup> This group ranges from those who seem to repudiate fully the details of Dennett's views (Dennett mentions Tom Wolfe and Leon Kass) to various writers (including Robert Wright and the novelist Richard Dooling) who are generally sympathetic to the view but, according to Dennett, misconstrue many of the consequences for agents like us.

<sup>3</sup> In a Dennettian spirit we could call Dennett's view DDAMN, for Dennett's DARwinian Materialist Naturalism. But if Dennett's view is DDAMNed, then its critics who are Generally Opposed to Dennett's Darwinian Materialist Naturalism would end up being GODDAMNed. So, I'll just leave these acronyms alone.

<sup>4</sup> Some other recent contributions in a similar vein include Walter 2002, Flanagan 2002, and Churchland 2002.

These two ways of reading *Freedom Evolves* are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Presumably, it is intended to be read in both ways. For my purposes here, I evaluate it primarily in light of how it stands with respect to the lively philosophical literature on free will. As I indicate at various points, however, I think that the demands of the dual audiences of the book raise some puzzles that merit further discussion.

## 2. Compatibilism, Revisionism, and the Real Dennett

There are at least two Dennetts in *Freedom Evolves*. Call one Dennett *Compatibilist Dennett* and call the other Dennett *Revisionist Dennett*. The former emphasizes themes and motifs of a piece with traditional forms of compatibilism. The latter emphasizes the need to abandon or transform various aspects of commonsense views about agency, moral responsibility, and so on, and represents a somewhat different thread of thinking.

The two Dennetts are intertwined throughout *Freedom Evolves*. Consider the following passage: “Our task, then, is to clarify the *everyday* concepts of possibility, necessity, and causation that arise in our thinking” (64).<sup>5</sup> This sounds like Compatibilist Dennett: a project in the tradition of GOFCA—Good Old Fashioned Conceptual Analysis.<sup>6</sup> But only a few pages later, Dennett also writes: “Some philosophers hope someday to unearth the one ‘true’ account of causation, but given the informal, vague, often self-contradictory nature of the term, we think a more realistic goal is simply to develop a formal analogue (or analogues) that helps us think more clearly about the world” (71). This is followed up by a footnote that clarifies that what he offers is a “partial account of what strikes us as the most important aspects of the everyday concept” (71 n. 2). He even goes on to explain why he thinks that “a coin flip with a fair coin is a familiar example of an event yielding a result (heads, say) that properly has no cause” (85). In passages like these, the project sounds closer to a revisionist one, something that tries to salvage the usable parts of the inherited and somewhat confused commonsense concepts, revising commonsense when it conflicts with a more scientifically plausible picture of agency, causation, and the like. (Hence, uncaused coin flips.) This project belongs to Revisionist Dennett.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Dennett uses “we” in this passage to include his coauthor of a previous article (Taylor and Dennett 2001) on which this section of *Freedom Evolves* draws.

<sup>6</sup> Not to be confused with BOFCA—Bad Old-Fashioned Conceptual Analysis—which presupposes things like a separate domain of necessary a priori truths to which philosophers have unique insight. We post-Quinean analytic philosophers don’t do *that* sort of thing, right?

<sup>7</sup> A similar ambiguity shows up in his earlier book on free will, Dennett 1984. For example, there he writes that his analysis of control is supposed to be an account of “*our ordinary concept*” (52 n., italics in original). However, in other places—such as when he considers intuitions in support of agent causation—he does not argue that we do not have these intuitions or that we just need to understand their content properly. In fact, he seems to

This apparent methodological ambiguity is not isolated to the discussion of causation. In the passage I quoted at the beginning of this article, Dennett suggests that free will is real, but not in the way “tradition” tells us it is. Similar remarks are made later in *Freedom Evolves*, when Dennett writes, “I claim that the varieties of free will I am defending are worth wanting precisely because they play all the *valuable* roles free will has been traditionally invoked to play. But I cannot deny that the tradition also assigns properties to free will that my varieties lack. So much the worse for tradition, say I” (225). If one thinks that tradition<sup>8</sup> has become a part of common sense—or even only reflects the contents of common sense—then it will be natural to suppose that Dennett is really Revisionist Dennett. If, however, one thinks that tradition is distinct from and perhaps even a tendentious supplement to common sense, then Compatibilist Dennett will seem to be the true Dennett.

Which Dennett—compatibilist or revisionist—is the real Dennett? We might suppose that both are. Many of us working on the problem of free will are tempted by approaches that find some way of capturing divergent and apparently competing concerns in the free-will literature. One example is Fischer and Ravizza’s view, which is at least friendly to incompatibilism about free will but committed to compatibilism about moral responsibility (what they call “semicompatibilism”). Another is Alfred Mele’s “agnostic autonomism.” Mele is officially agnostic about the compatibility of free will and determinism, and so he offers accounts of *both* compatibilist and incompatibilist agency. Perhaps the two Dennetts reflect something of a dual strategy aimed at capturing both traditional compatibilist and incompatibilist concerns. If so, perhaps the idea is this: many of our commitments are indeed compatibilist, but some of our conceptual machinery may have some lingering incompatibilist commitments. If it turns out that we do have such commitments, then we should get rid of them.

This seems to me to be a sensible way of acknowledging and perhaps even capturing some of the competing concerns in the philosophical literature on free will. And it would give us room to make sense of what look like different positions in response to various objections. For example, when pressed on whether or not free will requires the ability to do otherwise in exactly the same circumstances, Compatibilist Dennett can emerge to undertake a defense of traditional compatibilist views about these issues. When faced with objections that argue for elements of agent causal thinking in common sense, Revisionist Dennett can ac-

think that we do have these intuitions, but that they derive from an unfortunate “cognitive illusion” (77).

<sup>8</sup> Of Western philosophical thought? Of human reflection on free will? Of scientific thinking about agency? Dennett never says.

knowledge that we might think such things but that in this day and age we really ought not to.

Appealing as it may initially be to interpret Dennett in this fashion, it seems to me unpromising. This reading does not so much reconcile Compatibilist Dennett and Revisionist Dennett as it amounts to an abandonment of Compatibilist Dennett. While Revisionist Dennett can tolerate a bit of traditional compatibilism (after all, being a revisionist about some or other aspect of human agency doesn't entail revisionism about *everything*), Compatibilist Dennett has less room to be so flexible—or so I argue in section 3. While Revisionist Dennett might be able to assimilate most of the points made by Compatibilist Dennett, it is not obvious that Compatibilist Dennett can keep his identity as anything like a traditional compatibilist in the face of that assimilation.

Similar problems beset the account if we interpret Dennett as neutral on the issue of whether our commonsense concept is compatible with the thesis that determinism is true (or, more generally, that we inhabit a natural causal order). For instance, at one point Dennett expresses a view I call *semantic agnosticism* about free will: “If you are one of those who think that free will is only *really* free will if it springs from an immaterial soul that hovers happily in your brain, shooting arrows of decision across your motor cortex, then, given what *you* mean by free will, my view is that there is no free will at all. If, on the other hand, you think free will might be morally important without being supernatural, then my view is that free will is indeed real, but just not quite what you probably thought it was” (223).<sup>9</sup> At least in this passage Dennett is willing to be neutral about what free will, as we ordinarily mean it, really entails. It may entail the sorts of things that Dennett thinks we ought not to believe, or it may not. This seems to me a perfectly sensible position on the issue; determining the precise content of our concepts and the meanings of our words is a tricky business, and one might reasonably believe it is an open question how it will turn out. But, semantic agnosticism requires at least *prima facie* openness to the possibility that one's account is in fact revisionist.

<sup>9</sup> Although I am sympathetic to the basic point, I think Dennett's phrasing of it is unfortunate. Notice what work the business about an “immaterial soul that hovers happily . . . shooting arrows” is supposed to do in the example. Assuming that one did think an immaterial soul was required for the picture, it is doubtful that one thinks it *has* to be “happily hovering” or that it shoots arrows. Indeed, an *immaterial* thing is unlikely to be hovering or using arrows at all. So, whatever work this sort of characterization is performing, it does not seem to contribute to the philosophical work of the reply (though it preserves the image of Cupid shooting arrows from a prior example about conceptual changes and love). What is more important, however, is that Dennett ignores the substantial efforts by many contemporary libertarians to offer an account of libertarian free will that is real and *not* supernatural. Regardless of what one thinks about these accounts, it is not an entirely fair characterization of the available philosophical views or a fair portrayal of the available options to readers who are not professional philosophers.

In light of this, perhaps we should interpret Dennett as a straightforward revisionist. This reading is encouraged by the remarks he makes in response to Conrad, his imagined interlocutor throughout the book. Conrad complains that Dennett's account of free will isn't really free will but an inadequate substitute. Dennett's reply is in two parts. First, he offers an analogy to another case where ostensive conceptual change was acceptable. He asks us to imagine that, at some prior point, people thought that romantic love was caused by a flying god who shot invisible arrows at people. Upon discovering that there is no such god, some of these people went on to think there is no love. Others concluded that love wasn't as we'd imagined. Though the latter group seems to have made the right conclusion about love, is there good reason to think that free will is like love? Dennett clearly thinks so. But he does not say why we should suppose that our discovery is like the love case, as opposed to, say, the discovery that there is no Philosopher's Stone or no phlogiston.

The second part of his response emphasizes the now-familiar idea that the sort of freedom envisaged by Conrad is not worth wanting. Dennett writes that his interlocutor must "accept the burden of demonstrating why we are wise to hold out for these 'genuine' varieties of . . . free will, when my substitutes fulfill all the requirements you've listed so far. What makes the 'genuine' varieties worth caring about at all? I agree that margarine isn't real butter, no matter how good it tastes, but if you insist on real butter at any price, you really ought to have a good reason" (225). This response seems to be something of a non sequitur to the issue that drives Conrad and, I assume, those who worry that Dennett's neo-Darwinian materialism excludes free will. What is presumably at stake for these people is whether we have free will in the fullest sense of the word or not. It is a different and further question whether or not we should *want* to have it. Perhaps the sense we want is not worth having, but that would simply mean that we should revise our wants. However, these are not arguments that Compatibilist Dennett is well suited to make (as Compatibilist Dennett thinks that we never meant anything incompatible with the natural causal order). Since Dennett seems intent on making them, this lends weight to supposing that Revisionist Dennett is the truest voice of Dennett. If Dennett is really a revisionist about free will, then he need not worry about whether he is offering the real thing. Instead, what he has to show is that the replacement concept does all the work we need it to do and that the costs it incurs are acceptable when compared to the costs of retaining the commonsense concept of free will.

Although a great deal of *Freedom Evolves* is suggestive of a revisionist approach to free will, there are also plenty of indications that Dennett does not mean to embrace a picture that is fundamentally revisionist (or even open to revisionism in the way entailed by semantic agnosticism). For example, in a number of places he makes it clear that he rejects views that hold that we have no free will (222, 226 n.) and that he is giving an

account that makes good on the reality of free will (13). Although I think that one can make sense of the idea that one is both a revisionist and really a believer in a non-ersatz view of free will, this is not obvious to many people.<sup>10</sup> So, if this sort of revisionism really is Dennett's view, then some explanation is in order. Since he does not give us any, however, it may be reasonable to assume that he does not think of his own account as a non-ersatz revisionist account of free will. Moreover, a systematically revisionist approach to free will would be at odds with his occasional insistence that his account shows how what we have in mind by free will is consistent with a materialistic, Darwinian picture of the world. And although he acknowledges the similarities of such an account to his own, he explicitly does not choose to formulate his account as a theory of something "rather like free will" (98). And, at least in conversation, Dennett has confirmed that he does not intend his account to be revisionist.<sup>11</sup> So, Compatibilist Dennett retains a strong grip on the content of *Freedom Evolves*.

The problem of deciding which Dennett is the real Dennett does not go away so easily. The language of "the varieties of free will worth wanting" that harkens back to his prior book on free will does not recede in *Freedom Evolves*.<sup>12</sup> But neither does the emphasis that what we are getting is an account of everyday thinking.

Perhaps there is some way to preserve the two Dennetts. Or perhaps I grossly misunderstand the book. Even so, I think there is at least an *apparent* tension here that merits more discussion than Dennett gives it. And as Dennett rightly notes early in the book, "We are to some degree just as responsible for *likely* misunderstandings of what we say as we are for the 'proper' effects of our words" (17).

### 3. Revisionism and the Difference It Makes

In discussing the traditional dialectic between agent causal libertarians and compatibilists and the pressure to find a compromise between the opposed positions, Dennett notes that "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" (101).<sup>13</sup> My view about revisionism is akin to

<sup>10</sup> Vargas forthcoming b.

<sup>11</sup> In conversation, after the 2004 Pacific APA Author Meets Critics session.

<sup>12</sup> As Dennett emphasizes at the end of *Freedom Evolves*, "Use ethics to fix what we should mean by our 'metaphysical' criterion. . . . In other words, the fact that free will *is* worth wanting can be used to anchor our conception of free will in a way metaphysical myths fail to do" (297).

<sup>13</sup> He also writes, "Nobody ever became a famous philosopher by being a champion of ecumenical hybridism" (101). Perhaps we have different things in mind, but I am inclined to think that "ecumenical hybridism" aptly characterizes the work of at least Aristotle and

Dennett's about materialistic Darwinism—once you see what it can do, it isn't as bad as you might think.<sup>14</sup> However, I find Dennett's ambivalence about embracing a certain degree of revisionism especially puzzling. The sciences have a habit of reshaping the way we think about ourselves and the world, and this is very often a good thing. And as Timothy O'Connor has noted elsewhere (O'Connor 2000, xii), naturalism carries with it a tendency toward deflationism about the traditional topics of philosophy. So, why shouldn't Dennett embrace the deflationist propensity of naturalism in this domain and adopt a systematically revisionist approach to free will? A revisionist account need not be unprincipled about its proposed revisions. And on any reasonable account any revisions will be limited to a scientifically plausible and normatively adequate picture of agency. Moreover, Dennett believes his account already has the resources to handle praise, blame, and the like (289–302), and it is hard to see why that should change if Dennett admits that his account is a departure from the full contents of common sense.

To be sure, there are complaints one might have about revisionism. For those worried that Dennett's picture of the world entails that we have to revise our notions of free will and moral responsibility away from their *fullest meanings*, an account like Revisionist Dennett's will seem unsatisfactory. What is worrisome is that he leaves us with ersatz free will, or ersatz moral responsibility. But that these concerns could be felt by some of Dennett's interlocutors doesn't mean they should be felt by Dennett. After all, he should not get as hung up on the consequences of a sober-minded scientific view of the world as these other folks do, especially because he has an account of how so much of what *really* matters survives the revision. And once you see how much a cleaned-up account of free will and moral responsibility can get you, the worries about ersatz free will and moral responsibility tend to go away. Or, at least, that is what Revisionist Dennett ought to say.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, one might worry that all of the concerns about whether Dennett is a revisionist or a more traditional compatibilist are misplaced. Perhaps the purported difference between revisionism and compatibilism

Kant, for both found ways to integrate and recombine earlier traditions in a way that involved making various innovative compromises.

<sup>14</sup> Ideology alert: this is the almost inevitable part of the discussion where the critic starts to say things that amount to "The author is a reasonable person, so why doesn't the author think what I think?" And yes, elsewhere I've discussed some of the varieties of revisionism and argued that at least some are less troublesome than many suppose. See, for example, Vargas forthcoming b, Vargas 2004, and Vargas forthcoming a. Despite my obvious bias, I do think that my chief claim here—that Dennett needs to say more about how we are to understand him on this issue—holds irrespective of one's view about the prospects for revisionism.

<sup>15</sup> Whether this is really true is something about which we would need to have a serious and sustained debate. But because Dennett never broaches the issue directly, we can only imagine what he might say.



is a difference without a difference. Something like this is suggested by Dennett's comments on the similarities between his account of free will and Daniel Wegner's recent book *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, which, as the title indicates, holds that conscious will is an illusion. Dennett writes:

I think Wegner's account of conscious will is the best I have seen. I agree with it in almost every regard. . . . Wegner and I agree on the bottom line; what we disagree on is tactics. Wegner thinks it is less misleading, more effective, to say that conscious will is an illusion, but a benign illusion, even, in some regards, a veridical illusion. . . . I myself think that the temptation to misread this conclusion . . . is so strong that I prefer to make *the same points* by saying that no, free will is *not* an illusion; all the varieties of free will worth wanting are or can be, ours—but you have to give up a bit of false and outdated ideology to show how this can be so. (224–25)

Dennett later adds, “Perhaps time will tell which expository tactic, Wegner's or mine, is best for the topic of free will, or perhaps not” (225).

Though compatibilist and revisionist projects may share much in common, I do not think that this difference is *merely* terminological or one of expository tactics. Compatibilism does not ordinarily entail anything like widespread revision in our thinking or practices. Ordinarily, revisionism does. Revisionism holds that what we think about free will and what we *ought* to think about free will diverge in some significant way. Compatibilism does not. These differences can amount to real differences in how the theory is understood, what answers it can make to various objections, and what practical consequences follow from the theory.

Still, Dennett might point out that there is a historically august way to be both a compatibilist and a revisionist. Conditional analysis-style compatibilists, of the sort that take their cue from G. E. Moore, have often argued that even though we may sometimes *talk* as though we mean something incompatibilist, and although we may even believe that we are committed to something incompatibilist, what we *really* mean by “can” is something that is compatible with determinism. The diagnosis is usually that some piece of philosophical nonsense tricked us into assenting to something we don't really mean. So, perhaps Dennett could take something like this line. On this view our concept of free will is devoid of incompatibilist commitments, but we sometimes mistakenly come to believe that it has these sorts of commitments. If so, Dennett is a revisionist in the sense that he wants us to get rid of some of the things that we associate with free will but that strictly speaking are not a part of the concept (or meaning, or thought, or practice, or whatever else is up for revision).

Views of this sort are instances of something I call *weak revisionism*. What makes weak revisionism (about, for example, the concept of free will) weak in the relevant sense is that it is not really out to change our concept, only to correct our mistaken understanding of it. The concept

itself goes unchanged. This is in contrast to a more robust variety of revisionism that holds that we need to change the concept (or practice, or attitude, or what have you) itself. So, while it is doubtless true that there is a way to be both a revisionist of sorts and a compatibilist, this is not the distinction that is at stake. Rather, the relevant difference is between traditional forms of compatibilism and more “robust” forms of revisionism.

Consider several possible views about free will, ranging from a nonrevisionist account to the most revisionist account possible—full-blown skepticism about free will:

1. *Nonrevisionist compatibilism*: All we ever believed and were committed to was a set of things compatible with determinism or whatever the physical causal order of the universe turns out to be. (Our actual beliefs and commitments could be exactly those given by Dennett in *Freedom Evolves*.)
2. *Weak revisionist compatibilism*: All we ever were *really* committed to was a compatibilist picture of agency, but we sometimes (falsely) believed that free will required something that is incompatible with determinism or whatever the physical causal order of the universe turns out to be.
3. *Robust revisionism*: Our concept of free will is indeed committed to incompatibilism and we correctly view our own commitments as incompatibilist, but, as it turns out, free will doesn't really require such commitments (that is, free will is different from what common sense says it is, but we have it).
4. *Free-will skepticism*: There is no free will in any sense that anyone has ever been concerned with or committed to.

There is a wide spectrum of views to be had in the space between view 2 and view 4, and my characterization of this space (view 3) surely underdescribes the possibilities. For example, semantic agnosticism about free will does not map onto this framework, nor do views that hold that free will is not univocal or that we lack free will in the sense that we care about (but are nonetheless not committed to). However, impoverished as this sketchy framework may be, it does allow us to see the difference between Dennett and Wegner. And the difference is more than a simple expository tactic. Where Wegner seems ambiguous between (3) and (4), Dennett seems ambivalent about whether his account is an instance of (2) or (3).

Why do these differences matter? Well, the rough answer is that the closer you move toward free-will skepticism, the greater the pressure to say whether your account entails changes in our practices in light of the proposed revision. If it entails changes, this opens up room for considerable discussion about what revisions we should adopt. Alternately, if

changes in our conception of free will make *no* difference to our practice, we will want some explanation of why not. We will want such an explanation because it seems quite sensible to presume that what we think about the conditions under which someone is blameworthy (or not) plays at least *some* role in our praise and blame. So, the closer we get to free-will skepticism, the more likely it is that there is some significant change to be had in our practices and beliefs—even if the only change is the belief that our beliefs inform our practices.

Let us take stock. It is unclear which Dennett best represents the Dennett of *Freedom Evolves*. But which Dennett is the real Dennett does have consequences. For my part, I prefer Revisionist Dennett. To be sure, this is the more radical Dennett. The revisionist's departure from common sense might be especially worrisome for Dennett's interlocutors who fear the consequences of Darwinian naturalism. But, like a tough-minded scientist, Dennett might also say, "So much the worse for our delicate self-image." Sometimes we need to be reminded that it may be hubris to suppose that our inherited, historically and culturally rooted concepts of self and responsibility are both fully empirically plausible and normatively ideal.

Earlier, I suggested that revisionism is more palatable than it initially seems. I think this holds for Revisionist Dennett's account, too. For starters, adopting revisionism gives him a principled way to sidestep many of the philosophical debates that he plainly wants to avoid. For instance, he can dismiss some standard complaints about his analysis of "can" by saying that he is not concerned with perfectly describing the way we in fact use the word *can* in responsibility-relevant contexts. Rather, he is offering (to paraphrase Dennett) "a partial account of the everyday concepts that captures what we ought to be concerned about when we judge that someone has free will or that they are morally responsible." Similarly, suppose someone objects to Dennett's account on the grounds that there is a sense of inevitability that is relevant to assessments of free will and responsibility that, whatever its plausibility, is what we are concerned with in judgments of freedom and responsibility. Revisionist Dennett need not argue the point. In fact, he can concede that this is what many of us may well have in mind, and that it perhaps follows as a necessary upshot of a certain Cartesian picture of the mind. Nonetheless, he gets to shift the issue to whether we have good reason, apart from our merely wanting that sort of thing, to require it when we make judgments of freedom and responsibility.

In contrast, Compatibilist Dennett will leave his philosopher-critics unhappy because he explicitly and repeatedly passes up the opportunities to engage with that literature. For Compatibilist Dennett—at least the one who is concerned to make a contribution to the philosophical literature on free will—this is a bad idea. There are too many well-known incompatibilist arguments that disagree with him, making his

dismissal of these things unconvincing. Thus, Compatibilist Dennett's refusal to engage with traditional philosophical arguments undercuts the persuasiveness of his account in a way that would be less troubling for a revisionist, especially one who embraces semantic agnosticism about free will.

What is more, the revisionist's principled avoidance of the traditional arguments dovetails with the kinds of things that the real Dennett says about, for example, Robert Kane's insistence on the importance of indeterminism. Dennett presses Kane to explain *why* we should care about this sort of "*metaphysical* feature of Ultimate Responsibility" (131). A perfectly good reply to Compatibilist Dennett, the one engaged in GOFCA, is that this is required by our actual, everyday concept of responsibility. If Compatibilist Dennett wanted to reply, he would likely have to engage in the detailed work of analyzing and rejecting the various arguments that get Kane to his metaphysically laden analysis of free agency.

However, it is clear that the Dennett of *Freedom Evolves* is not especially interested in pursuing that route. Yet Revisionist Dennett does have more that he might say without taking up those arguments. He could simply shrug and say, "So much the worse for the everyday concept of responsibility."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he could go on to add (as Dennett actually does), "As we learn more and more about how people make up their minds, the assumptions underlying our institutions of praise and blame, punishment and treatment, education and medication will have to adjust to honor the facts as we know them, for one thing is clear: Institutions and practices based on obvious falsehoods are too brittle to trust" (289–90). In short, Revisionist Dennett can say almost all the things Dennett does say—and, importantly, he has principled reasons to say them. That is a variety of Dennett worth wanting.

#### 4. Dennett on the Value of Philosophical Work on Free Will

At the end of *Freedom Evolves*, Dennett writes: "My point has been that philosophers, *as philosophers*, cannot claim to be doing their professional duty to their very own topics unless they pay careful attention to the thinking of [psychologists, economists, biologists] and the others whose ideas have played prominent roles in this book" (306–07). Although I agree with the spirit of the remarks, I think Dennett puts the point too strongly—surely *some* philosophical work, even work on free will, can proceed sans much contact with the sciences. At the very least, there will be places where the sciences do not (yet?) have much to say about these

<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with Dennett's call to posit our metaphysics of agency in the light of normative considerations (297). I have explained why this strategy is unpromising if one is engaged in GOFCA (that is, traditional compatibilism) but much more promising when it is a part of a revisionist project. See Vargas 2004, 223–25, 229–33.

issues (for example, the value, if any, of our being agent causes of our actions). Nonetheless, we can agree on a weaker and more plausible claim that scientifically informed philosophy is likely to have more resources and better results than philosophy produced in a vacuum without scientific knowledge.

That said, I am puzzled about why Dennett does not go on to say something analogous about the value of philosophy for scientific work on human agency.<sup>17</sup> This sort of observation would be especially appropriate if Dennett's book is intended to address an audience much larger than professional philosophers. If I understand him correctly, however, he suggests the opposite. He claims that the philosophical literature beyond *Freedom Evolves* is unnecessary for those trying to build a naturalistically plausible account of free will. After describing his engagement with the nonphilosophical literature relevant to free agency, he writes: "I have ignored the ideas of more than a few highly regarded philosophers, sidestepping several vigorously debated controversies in my own discipline without so much as a mention. . . . I have convinced myself—not proved—that my informal tales and observations challenge some of their enabling assumptions, rendering their contests optional, however diverting to those embroiled in them" (307). The likely message this sends—that there is little or nothing to be learned from the non-Dennett parts of the philosophical literature of agency, free will, and moral responsibility—*cannot* be right.

As someone who is familiar with the neuroscience and the psychology literature on agency, Dennett is doubtlessly aware of the way in which much of this literature relies on conceptually impoverished pictures of agency. If there is a dominant view in it, it seems to be the sort of agent causal picture that Dennett strongly objects to. Even Wegner's *Illusion of Conscious Will*, which Dennett describes as "outstanding" (23) and something he agrees with "in almost every regard" (224), displays almost no sensitivity whatsoever to the possibility of a richly realized compatibilist account of free will—such as Dennett's. When Dennett writes, "I find that those who take it as just obvious that free will is an illusion tend to take their definition of free will from radical agent-causation types" (101) after canvassing some objections to agent causation, he could be describing Wegner and the overwhelming majority of the scientific literature's interpretation of scientific results.<sup>18</sup>

Despite what Dennett seems to imply about the comparative uselessness of philosophical reflection on agency and free will, I suspect that he

<sup>17</sup> In many respects, this is a concern I share with John Fischer. See his remarks in Fischer 2003 and in this symposium.

<sup>18</sup> For some other recent examples of philosophically serious critiques of parts of this literature, though probably unavailable at the time Dennett wrote *Freedom Evolves*, see Nahmias 2002 and Mele forthcoming.

would agree with what I have said here. Indeed, he criticizes some scientific but philosophically crude accounts of agency in chapter 8 of *Freedom Evolves*. And in doing so, he exemplifies the need for both the sciences and philosophy to pay much closer attention to each other's discussions of the various aspects of human agency.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, Revisionist Dennett ought not to hold that there is an asymmetry of relevance between science and philosophy. Revisionist Dennett acknowledges that at least some people some of the time really do have libertarian commitments in their everyday thinking about their freedom and responsibility. If so, it seems quite plausible that some of these people would be scientists, and that some of them would interpret their experimental data and design their research in the light of their incompatibilist beliefs. And if all of this is correct, then some of the things philosophers are to learn from scientists include as their (often tacit) suppositions the very things that Dennett would have no philosopher believe. So, we best get philosophers in at the ground level of scientific thinking about agency. (A similar lesson may even hold for Compatibilist Dennett. For on the most plausible reading of Compatibilist Dennett, people oftentimes do come to misconstrue their own commitments. And I see no reason to think that one's misconstruals cannot have similarly deleterious effects.)

All of this is not to say that philosophers do not have much to learn from the sciences. On the contrary, I think that we do have a great deal to learn. But if one spends much—or any—time studying psychological and neuroscientific research on aspects of agency, it becomes clear that scientists have a great deal to learn from philosophers, too. So, I do not think the philosophical debates beyond Dennett's book are as optional for serious reflection on free will as Dennett's remarks might be taken to suggest. I hope Dennett agrees.

## 5. Compatibilism Evolves

Though my focus here has been largely critical, *Freedom Evolves* is a rewarding book. It is the sort of book that fosters fruitful reflection, and I expect it will play a significant role in ongoing discussions of free agency both inside and outside philosophy. I heartily endorse the revisionist threads in Dennett's account, as I think they are fertile, provocative, and worth more consideration than they have received. If I am right, this sort of revisionism may amount to an evolution in how we understand

<sup>19</sup> If there really is a “hidden agenda that tends to distort theorizing in all the social sciences and life science” (xi), one that seeks to avoid the implication that “minds are just what our brains non-miraculously do, and the talents of our brains had to evolve like every other marvel of nature” (xi), then what we need is a dose of theorizing that is unafraid of the implications of naturalism. That sounds like a job for a contemporary analytic philosopher of agency.

compatibilism—not as compatibilism between our current concept and the various demands it faces but as compatibilism between the world and the concepts we should have, given what we know and given the demands that the concepts of free will and responsibility play for creatures like us. As Dennett writes:

Our attitudes on these matters have been shifting gradually over the centuries. We now uncontroversially exculpate or mitigate in many cases that our ancestors would have dealt with more harshly. . . . To the fearful, this revisionism looks like erosion, and to the hopeful it looks like growing enlightenment, but there is also a neutral perspective from which to view the process. It looks to an evolutionist like a rolling equilibrium, never quiet for long, the relatively stable outcome of a series of innovations and counter-innovations, adjustments and meta-adjustments, an arms race that generates at least one sort of progress: growing self-knowledge, growing sophistication about who we are what we are, and what we can and cannot do. (290)

Exactly.<sup>20</sup>

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