A slighter shorter version of this review appeared in the Times Literary Supplement, March 21st 2003, page 25

Choice Products

Daniel C. Dennett *Freedom Evolves* (Allen Lane, 2003) xiii + 347pp £20.00 0-71399-339-1

Daniel N. Robinson *Praise and Blame: Moral Realism and Its Applications* (Princeton University Press, 2002) xi + 225pp £19.95 0-691-05724-9

Review by: Matthew Elton

Science seems to portray us as complex lumps of matter, whereas common-sense sees us as rational, free, and conscious agents. Can we reconcile these two pictures? If not, we seemed to be forced to reject science or give up on what is most central to our understanding of what we are. In all his work, Dennett makes the case for reconciliation. Philosophy must answer to what is possible in the world described by science. But for him this does not mean that the project of explaining the activities of people is the same as or reducible to the project of explaining the activities of their brains.

The project of explaining people is special because people along with plants and animals, are such that they aim at certain goals. For plants and animals the aim is clear. It is survival and reproduction. The very idea of having an aim, and thus also the idea of being successful or unsuccessful, a flourisher or a flounderer, finds no place in the world described from the mechanistic perspective that is central to science. But if agents are made only from mechanistic parts how can they really have aims? Dennett's solution begins by tentatively presupposing that there really are agents with purposes, and using the presupposition to organise our understanding of what we find in the world. When we do this--Dennett calls it adopting the intentional stance--we come to see patterns and regularities in the world that, from a merely mechanistic stance, are invisible. According to Dennett the patterns and regularities revealed by the intentional stance, are so useful, so illuminating, that the tentative presupposition with which we began is shown to be justified. And all this makes good sense, he presses, when you consider that Darwinian evolution is a mechanism that blindly selects between

entities that are better or worse at cleaving to the goals of survival and reproduction.

But the goals of people are not, and Dennett is emphatic on this point, simply survival and reproduction. We care about other things too. In particular, the fact that we are askers and givers of reasons leads us to care about right and wrong. Bizarrely we care about right or wrong even though we may have no very clear or coherent account of what they are. What matters most is that we are committed to the idea that there are answers to our moral questions, whether we can find them or not. It is the commitment to this idea that makes us distinctively human. And once this idea is established, it makes room for the coherent application of terms such as praise and blame, responsibility, and, indeed, free will.

The precursors of reason asking and giving must have either brought some survival advantage or been a hard-to-avoid side-effect of some trait that did. However, drawing on Richard Dawkins' ideas about cultural evolution, Dennett shows how the reason asking and giving may have become firmly fixed in human culture quite independently of whether it aids or hinders survival. We can think of our reason asking-and-giving practice as akin to our engagement with mathematics. To a point being good at maths might be biologically useful, but very quickly maths moves away from anything so utilitarian. As such we would expect it to reduce our biological fitness. But the maths thing has its own momentum, securing its influence at a pace that far outstrips the speed with which mere biological evolution can produce countermeasures. In the same way, the practice of reason asking and giving, and what follows in its wake, could also establish an influence independently of whether it makes us fitter or not. The ends, then, that we reason askers and givers decide to adopt, can transcend our biological origins.

What is also striking about maths is that what is true or not in mathematics is something that is in no way contingent on our evolutionary history let alone our culture. Dennett flirts with the maths-morals analogy. He is sure that we cannot rule out the possibility that there may be moral norms that 'command assent in all rational agents'. If we don't all agree just yet, that's because morality is an evolutionary-cum-cultural work in progress. But in the end Dennett does not commit to this or indeed any other view about the actual end of morality.

Freedom Evolves provides an excellent argument to the effect that, viewed from the outside, evolution and cultural processes have made us into creatures that cannot help but take responsibility for our actions, cannot help but regard this as central, and hence, cannot but see themselves as free. But do the explanatory advantages of treating people as if they are free actually go anyway to justify or legitimate the claim that they are? For Dennett, they do, although he is ready to admit that the kind of freedom we have falls short of what we might have hoped for. Some disappointment is to be expected. Dennett's line is that philosophical and scientific ignorance of what is possible has over-inflated our expectations of what we might actually get. Whether he convinces on the crunch issue or not is mute--no surprise in this debate--but he provides a great deal to think about along the way.

In *Praise and Blame* Daniel Robinson tackles some of the same fundamental issues as Dennett. He covers an impressive range of topics--including many interesting historical and scientific case studies--in order to draw out nuances in our concepts of praise and blame. But he is much less successful in weaving his many threads into an overall argument. His central contention is that morality is something real, that it is something out there and independent of us. And because it is, and only because it is, our practices of praise and blame can make sense. Contrary to popular rumour, he presses, what science tells us about people generates no serious threat to these claims.

Dennett is less convinced than Robinson that focusing on the 'reality' of moral norms pays philosophical or practical dividends. But both authors are committed to what Dennett describes as 'holding the line against creeping exculpation', i.e. resisting the thought that as science tells us more about how our insides the work, we appear to be ever less responsible for our actions. Robinson is more open to subtle interactions between scientific knowledge and our moral judgements than many. Nonetheless, I wanted to know more about how the claim that morality is something real could be reconciled with our scientific picture of the world. Unless we are shown how such reconciliation can be achieved, we may suspect that there is some back door appeal to the supernatural. We have no reason to think that evolution needed any supernatural boosters, nor that our inner mechanisms need miracles to keep them ticking over. This point is never far from Dennett's mind, as he develops his account of what we are. It is all the better for that.