



# Daniel C. Dennett and Gregg D. Caruso. "Just Deserts: Debating Free Will"

Owen Crocker

Volume 42, numéro 2, mai 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089697ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089697ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Crocker, O. (2022). Compte rendu de [Daniel C. Dennett and Gregg D. Caruso. "Just Deserts: Debating Free Will"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 42(2), 7–9. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089697ar>

Copyright © Owen Crocker, 2022



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**Daniel C. Dennett** and **Gregg D. Caruso**. *Just Deserts: Debating Free Will*. Wiley 2021. 200 pp. \$64.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509545759); \$16.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781509545766).

The free will debate is perennial, complex, and unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. With the overwhelming amount of literature on the topic, this concise and engaging volume, presented in dialogue form, is truly a refreshing take. Dennett and Caruso challenge and help elucidate each other's views on a variety of issues. The authors make a good faith effort to reach a wide audience by making philosophically challenging material clear and accessible.

Caruso introduces the book by informing the reader what is at stake in this debate. He also provides a list of useful definitions for those who are venturing for the first time into the unfamiliar waters of free will and moral responsibility. The reader should take careful note of the definitions as they will later help clarify and differentiate Caruso and Dennett's views.

The book is divided into three exchanges. The first exchange, titled, *debating free will and moral responsibility* provides a strong foundation for the rest of the book, as Dennett and Caruso both define and operationalize their key terms. Caruso, a self-proclaimed free will skeptic, maintains that humans do not possess free will and subsequently, should not be held morally responsible for their actions. Caruso's position is of course much more nuanced, but the general description holds true. In contrast to Caruso's denial of free will, Dennett claims humans possess free will, in a certain sense, which subsequently provides justification for holding people morally responsible for their actions and behavior. Despite the clear difference in opinion, Dennett and Caruso do share many of the same beliefs. For example, both agree that libertarian free will is a non-starter (53).

The second exchange takes a deep dive into two arguments in favor of free will skepticism. The first is the manipulation argument. For those familiar with the literature, much ink has been spilled on Derk Pereboom's four case argument, which is intended to demonstrate how the influence of the casual forces of nature on our decision-making processes are not so different than if our neuronal networks were radically altered in our brain by neurosurgeons. If we aren't responsible for our behavior when a neurosurgeon directly alters our brain state to produce a desire to harm someone, why are we responsible for the indirect sociological and biological forces that determine our predispositions to harm someone? Despite Caruso's clear reasoning and concise review of the literature, Dennett remains unmoved, rejecting the force of the manipulation argument. In response, Dennett adds that if the subject whose brain states were altered was *aware* and *informed* about such events, the subject would no longer be under the control of the neurosurgeon's tampering (58). Dennett maintains that despite any direct or indirect influences on one's predispositions, persons who have the proper control to make thoughtful and rational decisions can be held morally responsible in the important sense of the word (70, 77; more on that later). There is no resolution between Caruso and Dennett on the force and effect of the manipulation argument. However, the exchange provides an excellent introduction to the argument.

The conversation quickly steers towards luck, where Caruso argues that constitutive and present luck undermines our morally responsibility. Our hometown, parents, school, biology, etc.



are all the products of luck. Relying heavily on Neil Levy's previous work on hard luck, Caruso expands the argument to show how the strong undercurrent of luck pervades all. Caruso asks: if the way we are fundamentally constituted is simply a matter of luck, how can we be responsible for the outcome of our choices (105-7)? According to Dennett, all that is required is the proper control mechanisms required to make well-informed and rational decisions. Dennett quotes the singer Ricky Skaggs twice, where he sings, 'I can't control the wind, but I can adjust the sails' (71). Dennett concedes that there is much that is out of our control, factors that push and pull us in different directions, but he maintains that none of these variables can negate our ability to control how we will respond and ultimately, act. Dennett is unconvinced by Caruso's attempt to demonstrate the illusory nature of free will and moral responsibility.

The third and final exchange showcases Caruso's alternative to retributive punishment and the current legal institutions' method of incarceration. Neither Dennett or Caruso are classical retributivists, meaning that neither purport to deem punishment as a good in and of itself. However, Dennett views punishment as a justifiable and necessary measure to ensure the integrity and efficacy of the criminal justice system (132). On the other hand, Caruso proposes what he terms the *public-health quarantine model*. The quarantine model is premised on the community's right to self-defense. Analogously to how a community is justified in quarantining an individual who poses a threat to the community for carrying a dangerous disease, the community is also justified in quarantining an individual who poses a criminal threat. The model is thereby a *forward-looking* defensive approach, whereas retributivism is a *backward-looking* punitive approach. Caruso makes it clear that his model is not *consequentialist* in nature, as it doesn't justify quarantining someone based on future goods, but rather quarantine is justified on the principle of self-defense (128). Caruso's model stresses the importance of public health ethics, which would emphasize efforts on preventing crime. For example, to prevent crime, social justice issues such as racism, sexism, education, poverty, and other systemic disadvantages need to be adequately addressed (130). For a full exposition and detailed account of Caruso's position see his *Rejecting Retributivism: Free Will, Punishment and Criminal Justice* (Cambridge University Press 2021).

Dennett's response to the public-health quarantine model is skeptical, but ultimately comes down to pragmatic considerations. After providing a detailed account of the evolutionary origins of punishment (161-71), Dennett wants to retain the phenomenon of punishment for mostly pragmatic reasons. He doesn't think anyone would want to live in a world without punishment (156). He seems to say that punishment is a necessary condition to enforce any set of rules, as he asks Caruso, 'how can one enforce the quarantine system if people rebel against it?' (132). Such a system, whether you call it punishment or not, is in fact, punishment.

Much of the disagreement that arises and ultimately remains unresolved between Caruso and Dennett can be explained by their respective projects. Caruso is attempting to unveil the fallacy and myth of *free will* in the strongest sense of the word, the idea of an uninfluenced god-like substance that deliberates and chooses without any external constraint (52-3). The impossibility of such a concept of free will grounds Caruso's claim that persons can't *truly* be deserving of punishment for their behavior since we aren't *truly* free. Dennett is not concerned with either of these conceptions

of free will or moral responsibility. In one sense, he falls into a *revisionist* camp of free will, as he doesn't consider himself a libertarian or classic compatibilist. Dennett wants to protect a version of free will that allows us to maintain our understandings of responsibility, accountability and other values that have been shown to be evolutionarily beneficial.

Ultimately, there is no agreement between the two. One can't help but think that both are simply unwilling to play by the other's rules. At multiple points, when Caruso asks Dennett which -ism, category, or box he would consider his view to fit into. Dennett responds that the options available are not sufficient to capture what he is attempting to describe (120-1). Dennett's position is difficult to pin down and is not clear until near the end of the exchange: people are not *truly* morally responsible, rather they ought to be held morally responsible for their actions because citizens have either tacitly or explicitly agreed to play by the rules of the game of criminal justice (13). Dennett then justifies this quasi-epiphenomenal account of moral responsibility on consequential reasons. In this way, Dennett does not see his view of punishment as *retributive* in the manner that Caruso had described it.

The result of the dialogue is disappointing, as common ground and mutual understanding are always worth pursuing. Nevertheless, the dialogue presents a wonderful landscape to the reader to consider a wide range of lead thinkers and key topics regarding free will, moral responsibility, and the role of punishment. After reading the dialogue, one may find their rightful place among the free will skeptics or decide to align themselves with Dennett's own brand of free will and moral responsibility. To make things even more interesting, Caruso and Dennett set up a website where readers can vote on whose account, they found more persuasive, which can be found at: [debatingfreewill.com](http://debatingfreewill.com).

**Owen Crocker**, University of Victoria