This is the accepted manuscript. Please cite the forthcoming published version in *The Journal of Moral Philosophy*.

Daniel C. Dennett and Gregg D. Caruso, *Just Deserts: Debating Free Will* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021) 223 pages. ISBN:973-1-5095-4575-9 (pbk.)

Hardback/Paperback: $64.95/$16.95

This outstanding book contains multitudes. Daniel Dennett and Gregg Caruso canvas many important arguments and topics in the contemporary free will debate, and so there is something here for everyone. The specialist can dig into the details while the beginner can get a sense of how philosophy proceeds within the broadly naturalist framework assumed by both Dennett and Caruso. I have recommended this book as a starting point for undergraduate students who want to write senior theses on the free will from an empirically informed perspective. In what follows, I will offer a summary of the text and discuss a critical issue. Dennett and Caruso seem to agree on so much that it is sometimes difficult to surmise the nature of the debate between them. But this ends up being a feature rather than a bug of *Just Deserts*.

The book begins with an introduction by Caruso that explains the central concepts in the free will debate. Then begins Exchange 1, an adapted version of the original “Just Deserts”  
 debate between Caruso and Dennett as it appeared in *Aeon* magazine, in which Dennett and Caruso lay out the basics of their positions (<https://aeon.co/essays/on-free-will-daniel-dennett-and-gregg-caruso-go-head-to-head>, 2018). Caruso is a moral responsibility skeptic and hard incompatibilist. He argues that there can be no desert in the basic sense—desert that is not grounded in further consequentialist or contractualist considerations—because we would lack free will if physical determinism were true and we would lack free will if physical indeterminism were true. Dennett is a compatibilist about free will, but an unorthodox one. He offers a forward-looking conception of our practices that does feature desert, but not at the basic level. In the critical coda to Exchange 1 (pgs. 30-37), Dennett clarifies that his position on free will is a *revisionist* one (cf. Vargas, Manuel. *Building Better Beings: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pgs. 2-4). He wants to back away from elements of ordinary thought and practice that are unlikely to be true given the empirical facts.

The second exchange, “Exchange 2, Going Deeper: The Arguments” focuses on arguments in the contemporary free will literature. Caruso motivates the notion of basic desert while Dennett rejects it by offering an evolutionary understanding of the moral emotions (pgs. 46-47). Then, Caruso and Dennett agree that human agents do not have libertarian free will (pgs. 51-52) before discussing arguments against compatibilism, including the manipulation argument and the hard luck argument. In their discussion about manipulation, it becomes clear that Dennett and Caruso strongly disagree about the notion of agentive control (pgs. 57-88). And in the discussion about luck, it becomes clear that Dennett and Caruso also strongly disagree about the role of punishment in our moral and legal practices (pgs. 107-115).

The final exchange, “Exchange 3, Punishment, Morality, and Desert” concentrates on Dennett and Caruso’s competing ideas about responding to wrongdoing but has wider implications. Dennett suggests that desert claims can be justified by higher-order consequentialist considerations. Dennett’s view of desert is nestled, then, within a “*contractualist* variation on *rule-utilitarianism*” (pg. 120). Internal to our practices, we say that penalties are fair when agents knowingly and with control violate the agreed upon rules; the practices themselves are justified by their overall consequences. But Caruso worries that Dennett’s view either collapses into free will skepticism or merely amounts to a consequentialist justification of retributivism (pg. 199).

Caruso instead proposes a quarantine model of dealing with wrongdoing based on the right to protect from harm, and he endorses the principle that the least restrictive measures should be taken to protect public health and safety (pgs. 127-128). Just as we primarily seek to cure the sick and prevent outbreaks, we ought to rehabilitate offenders and prevent crime. In both cases concerns for fairness and social justice are “a foundational cornerstone” of Caruso’s public health-quarantine model (pg. 130). Dennett’s concerns about Caruso’s view range from the conceptual to the practical. Can you have rights without corresponding responsibilities? And how would enforcement work (pgs. 133-135)? Dennett and Caruso go back and forth but the core disagreements remain unresolved.

About those core disagreements: intriguingly, as Derk Pereboom highlights in his introduction: “neither Dennett nor Caruso contends that the role of the concept of “basic desert” in justifying actual practice is worth preserving” (pg. ix). So, where Dennett and Caruso most fiercely disagree, “it is not clear whether they differ on the issue because Dennett endorses justifications in terms of desert while Caruso rejects them, or for some other reason” (pg. ix). Indeed, Dennett and Caruso spend a fair amount of time trying to figure this out themselves.

Dennett and Caruso are not disagreeing about terms; as Caruso says, this would be “unfortunate” (pg. 46). So, what is going on here? In part, I think Dennett and Caruso are arguing about how our concepts of “free will”, “desert”, and so on, *should* be used considering a shared background of empirical and anti-libertarian metaphysical commitments. Caruso invokes the notion of *real* desert and responsibility, and then Dennett insists that the skeptical arguments do not cause problems for *his sense* of desert and responsibility, each plumping for their competing conceptual frameworks while occasionally expressing bewilderment with the opposing framework.

Who makes the more compelling case? Although I do not agree with either author, I am greatly sympathetic to Dennett’s view. Like Dennett, I am skeptical about the centrality of the notion of basic desert. Dennett argues that morality is a kind of social construction, the combined product of evolution, our shared social life, and our reflective practices (pgs. 68-70, 96-97). I would put the idea this way: interpersonal morality and political institutions are social *technology*. And if this is the nature of our moral responsibility system, why worry about *real* desert? As Dennett suggests, asking about whether agents truly deservesomething is as confused a question as asking whether money has true economic value (pgs. 92-93). Rather than focus on the free will needed to basically deserve anything, Dennett takes himself to be trying to answer a question from John Rawls: “in what sense, then, can citizens of a democracy be free?” (pg. 191, from *A Theory of Justice,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Revised Edition, 1999: 4). By shifting focus from the control needed for basic desert to a sense of control that can feature in our moral and political lives, Dennett successfully blunts the force of the arguments for skepticism.

Nevertheless, I think Caruso has the upper hand in several places. First, Caruso does a compelling job in pointing out specific difficulties in Dennett’s replies to the arguments against compatibilism. And as Caruso correctly notes, the concept of agentive control at play in our current desert-based moral and political systems, even when suitably revised and consequentially justified, is not as insulated from skeptical metaphysical threats as Dennett sometimes seems to think. As Caruso says, Rawls himself seems motivated by a “*metaphysical argument* against desert”, that since who we are and what we do is largely the matter of undeserved, lucky endowments, we do not deserve anything in a basic, pre-institutional sense (pg. 140).

Finally, as Caruso approvingly mentions (pg. 94), Owen Flanagan has persuasively argued for the possibility of radically different moral systems (*The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Say that moral responsibility is a social construct in the sense mentioned earlier. The point of calling something a social construct is not to deny its reality. Instead, to say that something is a construct is, at least sometimes, to say that *it could be different if we made it so.* What moral-political system works best is partly an empirical question on Dennett’s view, and as Caruso points out, Dennett’s own view might therefore spit out the verdict that the public health-quarantine model is the more justified (pg. 100). Dennett appeals to the existing value of our current desert-based moral practices, but once we recognize that our moral and political systems are evolved-constructed social tools, then it is not clear that anything at all needs to realize this value in the moral world Caruso envisions. If a desert-free future is possible, it will be structured by very different social technologies. It would do you no good to point out the usefulness of currency to a human in the sci-fi *Star Trek* universe, whose earthlings have figured out how to run a successful economy without any form of currency at all.

Even so, these points are not conclusive. The Dennett-Caruso debate seems to me to be about what degree of metaphysical significance we *should* place on human agency. And this question is not only metaphysical, but also conceptual, moral, and (surprisingly) political. It is about the kind of moral world we *want* to inhabit. One reason I like this book so much is that I believe this question is at the very heart of the free will debate, and *Just Deserts* draws it out nicely. The elusiveness of the authors’ disagreement, then, turns out to be a virtue of the text. Both authors present vivid and compelling, if quite different, visions of moral worlds. The reader is left with much to consider.

Overall, *Just Deserts* showcases two leading philosophers in the free will debate contributing where the metaphysical paths are well-trodden. Readers of this journal might find it especially exciting to see the moral and political dimensions of the free will debate on full display. I hope that Dennett and Caruso’s debate in *Just Deserts* might serve for these philosophers as a delicious appetizer, a sampler of the philosophical banquet the free will literature has to offer.

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