Daniel C. Dennett and Gregg D. Caruso, *Just Deserts. Debating Free Will*, Polity Press Ltd, Cambridge, UK 2021, 223 pp.[1]

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This book presents a dialogue between the philosophers Daniel Dennett and Gregg Caruso on free will, moral responsibility, and the justification of criminal punishment. Gregg Caruso is a Professor at Suny Corning, and his research interests are moral philosophy, political philosophy, the philosophy of law, and the philosophy of mind. Daniel Dennett teaches at Tufts University, and his areas of expertise are the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of cognitive sciences, and the philosophy of biology, but he also dedicated a significant part of his research to the topics of this dialogue. The book is divided into three main exchanges of ideas: the first introduces the problems of free will, moral responsibility, and determinism; the second analyses the arguments against free will and moral responsibility, and the third discusses the justice systems proposed by the two opponents. In this brief review I will try to summarize, analyze, and evaluate the points of divergence, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the frameworks of these two philosophers, by distinguishing their descriptive and prescriptive claims. This book is relevant for several reasons: first, it is a philosophical dialogue performed by two philosophers with different academic expertise and backgrounds, which allows into a glimpse on how philosophers discuss, disagree, reciprocally redefine their terms, and argue with one another. They also offer us a methodological lesson: you must be able to present the thesis of your opponent in the most clear and complete possible way before criticizing it.

Caruso is a sceptic on free will and moral responsibility, while Dennett is a sui generis compatibilist on free will who argues that there is no incompatibility between determinism and self-control; the baseline for moral responsibility. According to Caruso, on a descriptive level, no one can properly be held responsible for what they do, and on a normative level it would be unfair to justify punishment by using the notion of 'desert'. Alternatively, Dennett defines free will in terms of the self-controlled action needed for moral responsibility based on desert and; he considers 'just desert' in terms of fair, appropriate, and proportioned punishment. According to him, on a normative level, treating everyone as non-responsible would be unfair to

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morally good people, because they deserve to be praised, while criminal and immoral people deserve to be punished. Thus, the notions of 'desert', 'fair desert', and 'basic-desert' are the main points of divergence between these two authors.

In fact, both Caruso and Dennett reject retributivism and appeal to a consequentialist and forward-looking justification of punishment, which produces beneficial social effects. Retributivism offers a purely retrospective justification of punishment according to which we ought to punish the criminal because she 'basically' deserves to be punished and punishment is justified solely by the fact that those receiving it deserve it. Classic retributivism, as presented in this book, implies an absolute moral scale in the universe. In order to reach a moral equilibrium, for every bad deed committed, a person intrinsically (basically) deserves punishment. To explain this concept, Caruso and Dennett appeal to Kant's example of the island,[1] in which, although there is no social contract, a criminal still deserves punishment for what he has committed in the past, independently of the forward-looking social effects of this punishment, and consequently independent of any contractualist and consequentialist considerations. By rejecting this view, Caruso also rejects the notions of free will, moral responsibility, and desert, while Dennett is still committed to the notion of desert and to a 'backward-looking' justification of punishment.

Thus, for the entire dialogue, Caruso tries to decipher and taxonomize Dennett's apparent contradiction and tension between a forward-looking justification of punishment, based on its positive forward-looking social effects, and a backward-looking notion of desert, according to which people 'really' deserve to be blamed or praised for what they do. Thus, Caruso repeatedly asks Dennett to define the role of 'desert' in his system since, according to Caruso, one can either reject retributivism and the notion of desert by embracing a purely consequentialist justification of punishment, or one can continue to embrace retributivism and backward-looking responsibility. However, Dennett refuses this dichotomic distinction by embracing a more nuanced, complex, and apparently contradictory approach. On the one hand, he is committed to a metaphysically relaxed notion of desert, refusing the metaethical realist commitment to basic-desert intended as an intrinsic and absolute moral scale of the universe, thus rejecting classic retributivism. However, on the other hand, he insists that desert is real, because once the social contract is in place, people are engaged in mutually binding practices according to which moral agents really deserve blame or praise for what they do within the social contract (also defined in terms of the 'Moral Agents Club'). Caruso argues that there are two options. One is either a retributivist who grounds the notion of basic-desert into a metaethical realism, or one is a pure consequentialist who should get rid of this notion *to court*. Dennett argues that the reality of desert is grounded on the social practice themselves, such as the economic value of money, which is not intrinsic, absolute, and socially independent. I agree with Caruso, who concludes that we can frame Dennett's view in terms of a mixed justification of punishment, which combines a global consequentialist justification of punishment with the criterion of desert to address each particular case.

In fact, by embracing a purely consequentialist approach, both on a general level and for addressing each particular case, we might conclude that sometimes the punishment of particular individuals does not produce long-term social benefits and therefore we should not punish them. However, Dennett argues that this fully-fledged, forward-looking, consequentialist approach would undermine the stability of the system, which nevertheless is justified on a consequentialist basis. Thus, in order to preserve an efficient and beneficial consequentialist system of punishment we should appeal to the backward-looking criterion of desert to address particular cases, according to which, every criminal really deserves to be proportionally punished for what she has done, independently of the local and immediate future benefits of that punishment. Dennett's point is that by using a fully-fledged, purely consequentialist approach for addressing each specific case, we would undermine trust in the justice system because we would not have clear criteria to define when and why we should avoid punishing a particular criminal in order to avoid negative, local, and immediate outcomes.

In the last dialogue, Caruso presents his 'public health–quarantine model', according to which, since no one is ever free and thus morally responsible for what they do, no one deserves to be punished. However, as we are allowed to isolate contagious innocent people to preserve the safety of others, we are also allowed to protect society from criminals who represent real dangers for the community by isolating them without really punishing them. Caruso offers the illuminating example of Betty, an Alzheimer's patient who disrespects the rules of her nursing home, by leaving the community without supervision. Although she does not deserve to be punished, nurses are allowed to partially restrict her freedom to preserve her safety as well as others. According to Caruso, despite their self-control capacities, all humans are ultimately like Betty. Although no one can be held responsible and thus no one deserves punishment, he insists that in his framework the moral and self-control capacities of criminals are still relevant for defining what kind of danger they represent for society and, consequently, what kind of measures we should implement to defend society from them. He appeals to Pereboom's forward-looking account of moral responsibility,[2] defined as 'answerability responsibility', according to which someone is responsible for an action if it is connected to one's «capacity for evaluative judgment in a way that opens her up, in principle, to demands for justification from others». Caruso argues that when we encounter apparently immoral behavior it is legitimate to ask the agent: «Why did you decide to do that?» or «Do you think it was the right thing to do?» Caruso says: «If the reasons given in response to such questions are morally unsatisfactory, we regard it as justified to invite the agent to evaluate critically what her actions indicate about her intentions and character and request reform moving forward». Now, if the immoral person replies, in line with Caruso's framework, that she is not responsible for what she has done because she is a victim of determinism and luck, should we consider this response as socially and morally satisfactory? Caruso does not address this issue, thus his framework seems to be

unsatisfactory in practice, despite being elegant in theory, because it does not account for real-life social practices and it does not really consider agents as agents capable of control, but rather merely as physical causal patterns of the universe. Dennett avoids this 'greedy reductionism' and, by using his Darwinian gradualism, argues that agents exist, as much as life and metabolism do. Although agents are ultimately causally affected by external forces and thus are not 'ultimately responsible', thanks to a socio-cultural process, they can reach a level of sorta-responsibility; namely, a level of self-organization in which they partly control and cause their behaviors. While Caruso ultimately reduces all forms of action and control to bottom-up causal forces, thus doing away with moral agents capable of top-down self-control, Dennett insists that most human agents reach a level of psycho-moral and self-control capacities that allow them to join the Moral Agents Club thanks to the complex and difficult process of inculturation. This ongoing process allows agents to be partial co-authors and controllers of the process of organization of their inner psychological lives, exerting causal powers in directing their actions. While Caruso insists that 'the' source of the agent's will is always external and precedent, Dennett insists that there are many causes in play some of these causes can be considered as agent-generated. Given that it is crucial to define a proper account of causation to address the problems of free will and moral responsibility,[3] the biggest problem in this book is that the different frameworks of causation have not been sufficiently and critically considered and analyzed.

Despite Caruso's agreement with Dennett that our socio-moral practices of attribution of attributing blame and praise are a bio-cultural evolutionary product, on a normative level he considers them as detrimental, suboptimal, and ultimately unjustified. Although the two authors agree that establishing the beneficial or detrimental effects of the system of moral desert is an empirical matter, Dennett argues that they are justified because it is the best system we have yet developed. Caruso correctly argues that Dennett might be as wrong as those who believed that morality was impossible after God's death. However, the problem with Caruso's proposal is that it never offers an alternative explanation of how we should morally educate our children to behave in a morally good way. It is not clear what kind of moral linguistic game he proposes and his notion of responsibility in terms of 'answerability' still requires an agential conception of morality. Instead, Dennett offers a good explanation of why the notion of desert is practically necessary to give shape to the psycho-moral development of children within society. Thus, despite Caruso's acknowledgement of the relevance of moral capacities and self-control in his legal system, he never properly explains how these capacities can develop if we get rid of the notion of desert and moral responsibility from the social practices of inculturation and moral development.

Thus, the crucial difference between Dennett and Caruso can be summarized in these terms: the former is more concerned about the social feasibility of his framework, while the latter is keener on theoretical and philosophical taxonomies and

definitions. Indeed, at a first reading, Caruso's position appears to be clearer and more rigorous in using definitions and taxonomies, while Dennett's definitions and commitments may appear unclear and contradictory. However, Dennett's apparent contradictions are just a symptom of his more nuanced and dynamic view. To use a metaphor, Caruso's theory is a clear line that clearly connects various points and definitions according to a well-defined taxonomy, which nevertheless seems partly detached from social practices, while Dennett's view can be visualized as a metabolic system that continuously reuses his materials in order to survive real-life scenarios. Caruso's position is theoretically clear and rigorous but more difficult to implement. Dennett's position seems apparently less taxonomically clear, but socially efficacious. To conclude, this book *deserves* to be read because it offers a clear and interesting introduction to the socially and philosophically relevant topics of free will, desert, and moral responsibly, which orient and give shape to our everyday forms of life.

[1] I. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. J. Ellington, Hackett, Indianapolis 1785/1981.
[2] D. Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York 2014.
[3] C. List, *Why Free Will is Real*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, US 2019.