

DARWIN AND THE NATURALISTIC TURN IN PHILOSOPHY

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL C. DENNETT

By Jon A. Lindstrøm

Daniel C. Dennett (b. 1942) is co-director at the Center for Cognitive Studies and professor of philosophy at Tufts University, USA. During the last four decades Dennett has been one of the movers and shakers in the fields of the philosophy of mind and psychology, cognitive science, and evolutionary theory. On the October 23rd Dennett visited Oslo, giving a lecture about "The evolution of Why". On the day before, Filosofisk Supplement had the great privilege and joy of meeting Dennett for a talk about his philosophical and metascientific views.

In the spirit of Quine, you embrace the view that philosophy is continuous with science. Is philosophy for you indeed the handmaiden of science?

Well, I think that is a little too much actually, philosophy is better than the handmaiden. But philosophy and science are certainly collaborators. I think philosophy is what you are doing when you don't know what the right questions are.

Once you've figured out which question to ask, then answering them will typically be matters of science or history. Philosophy is an open-ended explanatory quest. There is no formal method for doing it, no algorithm for figuring out what question to ask.

Many contemporary philosophers of mind and science seem, like yourself, to pride themselves in being virtually as well-versed in cognitive science and neuroscience as the scientists themselves. But in recent years we also seem to have gotten a fairly strong resurgence of a more armchair style of metaphysics. Would you agree that the field has become thus divided?

Yes, there has been something of a backlash and division.

In recent years you have allocated the lion's share of your intellectual energy on cognitive science and evolutionary theory. Do you however still feel any kind of intellectual kinship with the more aprioristic philosophers of mind and science?

Yes, actually I do. At its worst, I think it is a really hopeless attempt to answer interesting philosophical questions. It is just the very wrong way of doing things. But at the outset the questions are pretty much the same. That is why it is worth staying in touch with and arguing with people who do philosophy in this way. One of my best graduate students right now is writing a dissertation which takes on this aprioristic philosophy of mind and subverts it from within. That is valuable work, and I'm very glad she is doing it well.

In Freedom Evolves, your sequel to Elbow Room, you aim to explain how all "the varieties of free will worth wanting" can evolve through a purely mechanistic process, and how free agency and free will are underpinned by various subpersonal mechanisms. You have also addressed the topic of free will in several other philosophical papers. Has your compatibilist account of free will been driven by a sort of personal, existential quest to "save" free will from mechanistic science, or has it been more of a relaxed effort to elucidate a certain traditional notion of folk psychology?

In some regards I think that free will is *the phi-*

losophical question. It is a question you can get undergraduates to be concerned about within 10 minutes. It matters! Its mattering is what drives a lot of philosophy, though not always in the way one would want. When the topic is free will a lot of people lose their philosophical talent – they accept arguments they would never have accepted in another quarter. They are under the impression that the yawning abyss of nihilism and the meaning of life are all there, and it really is all there. But I think I have found a relaxed path where you can have all the free will worth wanting without having to overthrow science or make special exemptions for human beings. Jerry Fodor once said in a review of me that what we want is a will so free that when Eve decided to eat the apple even God did not know what she would do. And that, of course, is not the kind of free will I believe in. I think we should say: Wait a minute, why would anyone want *that*? We cannot have that. Why is that mattering? The only reason, I think, is a sort of misplaced absolutism. Some people think the only way to protect free will is to make it absolute. They wring their hands and start getting metaphysical, indulging in what Strawson called "panicky metaphysics".

Would you say that your basic defence of free will takes place from the intentional stance? First we ascertain whether an intentional system is acting rationally and freely based on its overall behavioural profile, and then brain science and cognitive science may come and fill in the underlying details?

Oh yeah, I think that is right. Here we have a huge methodological disagreement between me and Jerry Fodor. Jerry has said that if you want to know whether someone is actually a believer, you have to look inside and see what kind of machinery is in there; you have to make sure that the system contains some "belief box", or sentences in the "language of thought". But that is backwards. Looking at the machinery is not going to tell you anything unless you interpret it, and that you have to do from the intentional stance. You cannot identify mental representations independently of their functional role. It is only by seeing how they enable the behaviour of the intentional system that licences us to call them representations in the first place.

Speaking of Jerry Fodor: some weeks ago he visited Oslo, delivering a lecture entitled "What Darwin Got Wrong". It

is safe to say that the evolutionary biologists in the audience were less than thrilled by this attempt of a philosopher to discredit natural selection as the driving force of evolution. What basic philosophical perspective, do you think, can make such a renowned philosopher think he is able to tear down the whole elegant and corroborated theory of natural selection with basically one swift philosophical stroke?

In some regards I think that free will is *the* philosophical question.

Years and years ago, I said that Jerry was a sort of closet creationist. People were really upset by this, saying you are really unfair with Jerry. Jerry and I were on pretty good terms at the time, but now he is out of the closet.

He claims to believe in evolution, though ...

He says his view gives no comfort to the intelligent design people because he doesn't say there was an intelligent designer; he says it's a mystery how it happened. If you look closely at Jerry's whole career there is a pattern that emerges, one which I wrote about in "Granny's campaign for safe science"². He has been against every important advance in the sciences of the mind since he was a boy. He has fought a rear-guard, conservative defence with what he calls "classical cognitive science". But that is a kind of mythical cognitive science. It is Cartesian; he now calls himself a Cartesian. In his writings there are these evasive passages where he seems inspired by the idea that we will never understand the mind. He likes it that way, he wants the mind to be mysterious and miraculous. One of the great puzzles about Fodor is that someone who wrote *The Language of Thought* would be absolutely uninterested in artificial intelligence. "Good Old-Fashioned Artificial Intelligence" was an attempt to write programs in the language of thought. But he never gave it a minute.

Fodor can often seem to be man of strong methodological principle ...

Jerry's method is another side to his view. He likes to use constructive dilemmas which have the following form: We have a fork in the road where you either have to do this or you have to do that. As soon as you have made a decision, then, you immediately face another fork in the road where you again have to do either this or that. This procedure will be repeated again and again and again, no mat-

ter how preposterous the consequences might be. Well, this style of argument always depends on its first move, the first either/or. And always, or almost always – I have not actually confirmed my hunch – he sets up an absolute dichotomy with very hard edges. He cannot allow for any intermediate cases.

And that is a rather undarwinian idea, right?

Exactly! Wake up, Jerry; Darwin showed that such essentialism is always mistaken. Some people think that this means that we cannot use constructive dilemmas in philosophy, and that is almost always true. My favourite example of this rule is the following "proof" that there are no mammals. Here is "Jerry Fodor's argument" for why there are no mammals, are you ready? Look, either every mammal has a mammal for its mother or it does not. If it does not have a mammal for mother it cannot be a mammal. Yet every mammal surely has to have a mammal for mother. But that generates an infinity of mammals! So there cannot really be any mammals ... Or, if there is one mammal that does not have a mammal for mother, it has to be the Prime Mammal! This is anti-Darwinian thinking, is it not?

I am inclined to concur ... But let us now move on to talk a bit about the so-called "Darwin Wars" of the 90's, in which you were on one side and a renowned paleontologist like Stephen Jay Gould was on the other. Why did this debate turn so heated?

Oh, I think the answer to that is very simple. Gould, for reasons good and bad, had become way too powerful and influential in the United States. Nobody dared to disagree with him in public. I realized that this was bad, and decided that I was going to change things. Some friends of mine, philosophers of biology and biologists who saw drafts of my chapter on Gould in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, urged me not to publish the book with that chapter. And I said, what, because it is false? And they said, no-no, because Gould will tear you to shreds. And that was the reason why I had to publish it. For more than a year after the book came out Gould refused to comment on it when asked about it in public. He said it was beneath any comment. But then John Maynard Smith brought out a review of my book in the *New York Review of Books*, then of course he went ballistic.² A year and a half before publishing my book I had sent him a

draft of the chapter and invited him to talk about it. We spent two or three hours going over a draft of that chapter, and there were various things he was very unhappy with. Oddly enough, the thing that bugged him the most was my challenging him on art history and the term "spandrels".

Nearly all modern evolutionists seem to be naturalists, secularists, lovers of liberal democracy, and opponents of fascism and stoning of unfaithful women. As to major moral and intellectual struggles, don't you in fact have nearly everything pivotal in common?

Yes ... but before the book was published I once met Steve Gould in a hotel room in Boston. I said, Steve, would you agree that natural selection is fundamentally an algorithmic process? He said, no. That certainly helped fuel my judgement that at some level he was very uncomfortable with this idea. He did not want it to be the case. All this stuff about contingency and so on – he wanted there to be something non-mechanical, irreducible, and unpredictable about the process of natural selection. He was a sort of romantic in a sense that I am not.

Let us at last attend to your take on religion in Breaking the Spell. The theoretical case for atheism might be said to rest on the following two cornerstones: I) The philosophical refutations of the alleged proofs of the existence of God done by Hume, Russell, Ayer, Flew, et. al., and II) Dawkins' functional complexity argument for the astronomical improbability against any God-like being existing. What does your story on the natural history of religion add to the atheist case laid out by Hume et. al. and Dawkins?

It is all very well about the logical arguments, but how do you explain why so many billions of people believe? There must be something to it for so many people to have held to religious beliefs for so long. The very tenacity of religion, and the love it inspires; a love which justifies killing people who disagree with you is something that got to be explained. A naturalistic account of religious belief has the byproduct that it undercuts the evidence for its truth. I am doing now a study of half a dozen atheist clergy. They realize that they do not believe in all of this stuff anymore, and that they should have dropped out of seminary right away. But they are trapped! They desperately want to make a clean break but they cannot because of their responsibi-

lities to their families and so on. The reason why I tell this story is mainly because it is not listening to or arguing with the arguments for or against the existence of God that matters. Well, one of them read Christopher Hitchens' book *God is not Great*, and that was the straw which broke the camel's back. But for the most part what mattered was looking at the history of the church; by seeing that there is an alternative explanation as to how their creeds and religious practices developed.

Yes ... but the more obvious comparison is with William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The difference is that James is looking at individual psychology, he is not looking at structures and institutions. I love to teach Nietzsche and he has been a big influence on me. He was full of insights into the psychological dynamics of religion. There is some place where he describes the crucifixion as a "baited hook". It is such a shocking image, but there is so much truth to it too.

Do you see any common ground between your project of depicting the natural history of religion and Nietzsche's (in)famous attempt at undermining religion and (religious based) morality in the Genealogy of Morals?

Professor Dennett, thank you very much for the interview.

NOTER

¹ <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/granny.htm>

² See <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1703>: John Maynard Smith, one of the deans of modern evolutionary biology, delivered the following rather damning verdict on Gould: "Gould occupies a rather curious position, particularly on his side of the Atlantic. Because of the excellence of his essays, he has come to be seen by non-biologists as the preeminent evolutionary theorist. In contrast, the evolutionary biologists with whom I have discussed his work tend to see him as a man whose ideas are so confused as to be hardly worth bothering with, but as one who should not be publicly criticized because he is at least on our side against the creationists. All this would not matter, were it not that he is giving non-biologists a largely false picture of the state of evolutionary theory."