

In Memoriam Daniel Dennett (1942 – 2024)

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The influential American philosopher and cognitive scientist, Daniel Clement Dennett, passed away on 19 April 2024 at the age of 82.¹

Daniel C. Dennett was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and came from an academic background. Dennett's mother, Ruth Marjorie (née Leck), was an English teacher, and his father, Daniel C. Dennett Jr., was a historian of early Islam and a covert intelligence agent in the Office of Strategic Services and then the Central Intelligence Group, the forerunner of CIA (Dennett 2023, 3). Dennett spent part of his childhood in Beirut, Lebanon, where his father posed as a cultural attaché to the American Embassy. However, when his father was killed on a mission in a plane crash in Ethiopia in 1947,

Dennett moved with his family back to America. In his younger years, he lived in Winchester, Massachusetts. Dennett described himself as a curious child who was interested in how things worked, and in his youth, he was interested in building things – from tree houses to model sailboats. However, his interests were wide-ranging, and at a young age, he was introduced to sailing, canoeing, and art studies, which led him to consider becoming a sculptor. Music also played an important part in his life; he could play the piano and was especially fond of jazz music.²

Dennett first studied at the Philips Exeter Academy, a preparatory private, coeducational university, and graduated in 1959. After that, he studied first at Wesleyan University. However, after reading Willard V. O. Quine's *From a Logical Point of View* (1953), he wanted to confront the famous

¹ See Kendall (2024, April 19).

² In his memoir, Dennett dedicated a chapter to his passion for music, which he pursued as a hobby during college. See Dennett (2023, Chapter two).

American philosopher about the philosophical problems raised in the book.³ Therefore, after one academic year, he transferred to Harvard University, where he was a student of Quine and received his BA in philosophy in 1963. His honors thesis was called “Quine and Ordinary Language,” in which he criticized Quine’s attempt to “regiment” ordinary language (Dennett 2023, 43). However, Quine heavily influenced Dennett’s philosophy. Dennett wrote:

Years later I think I have finally figured out what it was about Quine that inspired me: he wanted to *fix what was broken* in the way philosophical problems were being explored. He didn’t believe in “real magic” and thought he could diagnose a major misstep that was taken for granted by almost all philosophers (Dennett 2023, 29).

After Harvard, Dennett studied at Hertford College, Oxford, and he received a DPhil in philosophy in 1965. Oxford was then the “epicenter” of ordinary-language philosophy,⁴ and Dennett wrote his dissertation under the supervision of the influential British philosopher Gilbert Ryle. The title of Dennett’s dissertation was *The Mind and the Brain: Introspective Description in the Light of Neurological Findings: Intentionality*, he later published the work as one of his first and most important books, *Content and Consciousness* (1969). Many philosophers and scholars inspired his dissertation, but one of the most influential was Ryle. As Dennett acknowledges, he was particularly inspired by Ryle’s writings, which gave many examples and analogies “to unsettle readers’ lazy imaginations” (Dennett 2023, 67). Dennett, thus, talks about the influence of Quine and Ryle: “I’m what you get when you cross a Quine with a Ryle” (Dennett 2023, 67).

It was during his Oxford studies that Dennett’s fascination with the sciences was sparked, particularly with neurophysiology and neuroanatomy. He describes the moment when his friend, John Graham, first introduced to him what neurons were and how they were connected to networks. This experience led him to the hypothesis that such networks could learn by a kind of evolutionary process within the brain, the core idea that he further developed in his dissertation and later works (Dennett 2023, 45 – 46, 64).

During his Harvard Studies, Dennett met his wife, Susan Bell Dennett, whom he married in 1962. They had two children together, a son and a daughter. Dennett’s first position was as an assistant and then associate

³ See Dennett (2023, 29 – 30).

⁴ Dennett notes that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* were the bibles for students, including partially himself. See Dennett (2023, 52 – 53).

professor in the philosophy department at the University of California, Irvine, from 1965 to 1971. Dennett and his wife then moved back to the East Coast, where he took a tenure position at Tufts University in Massachusetts, where he taught almost his entire career. At Tufts, he was a director for the Center for Cognitive Studies and was recently granted the honorary title of *emeritus professor*. He was also a visiting professor at Harvard University, the University of Pittsburg, Oxford University, and more. In recent years, he has lived with his wife in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, until his passing.

Dennett wrote hundreds of articles⁵ and dozens of influential books, including *Content and Consciousness* (1969), *Consciousness Explained* (1991), *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1995), *Freedom Evolves* (2003), *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness* (2005), *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (2017), and many more. In his books, Dennett formulated naturalistic views on intentionality, consciousness, free will, religion, and morality. He was also interested in the theory and science behind artificial intelligence and participated in evolutionary debates. Dennett is known for avoiding the use of traditional philosophical terms, preferring to formulate his own, such as “intentional stance,” “hetero-phenomenology,” “intuition pumps,” etc. Dennett received several honors for his work, the most notable of which was the Erasmus Prize, the Netherlands’ highest honor, which he received in 2012.⁶

Dennett’s philosophy (or philosophical method) can be characterized by one of his favorite quotes from Lee Siegel’s book, where Siegel made a distinction between “real magic” and real magic:

“I’m writing a book on magic,” I explain, and I’m asked, “Real magic?” By real magic people mean miracles, thaumaturgical acts, and supernatural powers. “No,” I answer: “Conjuring tricks, not real magic.” Real magic, in other words, refers to the magic that is not real, while the magic that is real, that can actually be done, is not real magic (Siegel 1991, 425).

Dennett pointed out in his writings that in contemporary philosophy, philosophers want to preserve “real magic” instead of explaining how tricks are done, as in stage magic, in which magicians show us a set of tricks that achieve an apparent magical effect. In his memoir, Dennett (2023, xx) said that

⁵ See the whole list: <https://sites.tufts.edu/cogstud/dan-dennett-recent-work/> (Accessed 7. 5. 2024).

⁶ See <https://erasmusprijs.org/en/laureates/daniel-dennett/> (Accessed 7. 5. 2024).

his guides and heroes were precisely the scientists and philosophers who wanted to explain the tricks behind magic; he named them the “anti-philosophers,” who were “not just skeptics and debunkers but constructive explainers, groping for models or theories to replace the armchair verities of the philosophers with testable ideas” (Dennett 2023, xx).

I think that Dennett can also be characterized as a “philosophers’ antiphilosopher.” His philosophy can be understood as a project of demystifying phenomena that, even today, are considered magical and beyond the grasp of scientific research. He criticized traditional thinking about the “big” philosophical problems, such as the “mind-body problem” or the so-called “hard problem of consciousness.” He considered them pseudo-problems by pointing to persistent intuitions, which he called “intuition pumps,” still present in philosophical and scientific discussions.⁷ For example, in his book *Consciousness Explained* (1991), Dennett introduced “Cartesian Materialism” – a persistent view that there is a central place in the brain (“Cartesian Theatre”) where the contents of experience are presented for the subject (Dennett 1991, 107). While no one currently subscribes to this view, Dennett argued that even today, many theorists – philosophers and scientists – start from its assumptions and intuitions.

Dennett, therefore, knew the importance of asking good philosophical questions and, hence, the important part philosophy plays in scientific inquiry. In the book *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995), he wrote:

Scientists sometimes deceive themselves into thinking that philosophical ideas are only, at best, decorations or parasitic commentaries on the hard, objective triumphs of science, and that they themselves are immune to the confusions that philosophers devote their lives to dissolving. But there is no such thing as philosophy-free science; there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination (Dennett 1995, 21).

This was, however, often ignored by Dennett’s critics. Because he criticized traditional philosophical approaches about the mind, consciousness, or free will, Dennett was often called an eliminativist, behaviorist, or even a proponent

⁷ “Intuition pump” is Dennett’s term for philosophical thought experiments that support intuitions or common understanding of certain phenomena. He includes Frank Jackson’s “Knowledge argument” or John Searle’s “China Room” among such intuitions. However, Dennett considered some “intuition pumps” useful thinking tools, but not these ones. See Dennett (2013).

of “scientism,” the idea that hard science (i.e., physics, chemistry) and the scientific method are the only way to render truth about the reality.

However, this would be a misinterpretation of Dennett’s philosophy. His main aim was not to eliminate but to demystify these phenomena by formulating a naturalistic account of them. In other words, Dennett was not just a skeptic and debunker, but most importantly, he was a naturalist. This is particularly evident in Dennett’s philosophy of mind, characterized by an interdisciplinary approach to explaining the mind and consciousness, drawing on work from philosophy, cognitive sciences, neurosciences, and evolutionary biology.

In his most important book, *Content and Consciousness* (1969), he formulated an account of intentionality, an “intentional stance,” the idea that we automatically adopt the strategy of treating another complicated object (i.e., a human, an animal, or a machine) as a rational agent that possesses mental states such as beliefs and whose actions and behavior can be predicted based on the content of these states. The “intentional stance” or “intentional strategy” is one of the key elements of Dennett’s philosophy, and his understanding of intentionality is closely related to his understanding of consciousness.

In his famous book *Consciousness Explained* (1991), Dennett formulated his naturalistic theory of consciousness. Here Dennett proposed the “Multiple Drafts Model” as an alternative to Cartesian Materialism, and which he later renamed the “Fame in the Brain.” At the heart of this model is the hypothesis that the brain does not have a single, coherent stream of consciousness (there is no “Cartesian Theatre”); rather, the brain generates multiple, parallel “drafts” or interpretations of experiences. These drafts are continuously revised and updated as new information is processed. A key feature of this model is that this unconscious process is competitive in nature, and only some information becomes famous, and therefore conscious enough to be available to other cognitive functions (“Fame in the brain”). Dennett’s model bears many similarities with the so-called “global workspace theories,” which are now considered among of the leading theories of consciousness.

In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett also proposed a method to study consciousness called “heterophenomenology.”⁸ Heterophenomenology consists of the scientist recording the subjects’ introspective beliefs to create a pre-theoretical description of conscious experience as it appears to the subject (sometimes referred to as “phenomenology of the other, not oneself”).

⁸ Dennett first coined this term in 1982. See Dennett (2023, 136 – 137).

However, we should treat these beliefs as data to be explained by further empirical research, not necessarily as true accounts of mental reality (Dennett 2023, 136). It should be pointed out, that even though Dennett presented the term “heterophenomenology,” it is not a new method but a standard procedure in cognitive sciences and neurosciences (Dennett 2005, 36).

Dennett wrote many influential papers; one of the most well-known is “Quining Qualia” (1988). In “Quining Qualia,” Dennett rejected the so-called “qualia,” which refers to the qualitative properties of experience, by presenting several intuition pumps designed to show that it is an ill-defined philosophical concept. He elaborated this critique in his other works, pointing out that neither consciousness nor some of its properties (qualia, “what-it-is-likeness,” “phenomenal character”) pose the “hard problem” for contemporary scientific research. Rather, the “hard problem” lies in the persistent intuitions that still shape how we think about consciousness. Dennett’s rejection of the “hard problem” subsequently led Keith Frankish (2016) to introduce so-called “illusionism,” and Dennett (2016) considered illusionism to be the “default theory of consciousness.”

Dennett was a proponent of compatibilism regarding free will – the approach that free will is compatible with determinism. He said,

I believe in free will, in a nonmagical sense that really matters.... I also believe that this kind of free will is not threatened by determinism.... Determinism is not a puppeteer controlling you. If you’re a normal adult, you have enough self-control to maintain autonomy, and hence responsibility, in a world full of seductions and distractions” (Dennett 2023, xxii).

Dennett thus criticized deniers of free will and recognized the importance of free will in society, especially in the context of moral responsibility.

In later works, Dennett returned to the ideas he proposed during his academic career but focused mainly on the evolutionary story behind them. In one of his latest books, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (2017), Dennett summarized his evolutionary theory about the mind and consciousness, drawing on biological and cultural evolution. Regarding evolution, Dennett was an adaptationist and, therefore, believed that natural selection was a key element in evolution, for which evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould criticized him (see Dennett 2023, 363 – 372). In cultural evolution, he was inspired by memetics theory, first presented by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In *From Bacteria to Bach*

and Back, Dennett argues that consciousness is a “user illusion,”⁹ a digested version of complex cognitive processes that have evolved as a process of biological (genetic) and cultural (memetic) evolution to play an important role in monitoring ourselves as well as in communication (Dennett 2017, Chapter fourteen).

Dennett is also known as one of the “Four Horsemen of New Atheism” alongside Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. He stayed an atheist his whole life and criticized religious institutions and practices. However, even though Dennett was an atheist, he appreciated “goodness” in the secular world, especially through human action and practices, i.e., through scientific studies that help improve society (such as curing human diseases), art, charity, and other ways which humans can contribute to improving the life. To him, praying for the better was not enough, and he preferred the real over the symbolic good (Dennett 2023, xviii).

Although Dennett often aroused controversy with his philosophical ideas, he knew he might be wrong and was a modest and kind human being. Thanks to philosopher Keith Frankish, I had the privilege to discuss with him online last year. He made time for me even though it was his birthday, and we discussed the ethical issues concerning artificial intelligence, especially language-generating systems, such as ChatGPT.

Dennett’s legacy teaches us to find beauty in the natural world rather than in supernatural beliefs. I think that this idea can be summarized in one of my favorite passages: “When we understand consciousness — when there is no more mystery — consciousness will be different, but there will still be beauty, and more room than ever for awe” (Dennett 1991, 25).

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⁹ Dennett first developed the idea of consciousness as a “user illusion” in *Consciousness Explained* (1991).

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