

Daniel C. Dennett

Autobiography

Part 3

Dan Dennett continues to philosophically reflect on his philosophical life. This third and final episode covers 2003 to the present.

The forces pulling me away from my original philosophical preoccupations have intensified since 2003. I intend to respond to the demands of philosophers that I spell out my positions with more attention to their objections and challenges, but there are only twenty-four hours in the day, and in recent years I have found other projects more pressing. I still identify myself as a philosopher, but a swift skim of my *curriculum vitae* shows few recent publications in philosophy journals, and those are responses to critics. More and more of my time and energy has been devoted to cognitive science, and to evolutionary theory and its ramifications. I applaud the convergence by naturalistic philosophers, psychologists and other researchers in the life sciences on the physical and biological foundations of the phenomena which compose the humanities: ethics, art and music, humor, and of course religion, to name a few. The shrill defensive cries of those in the humanities who view their topics as off-limits to science, as somehow transcending all gross considerations of how their favorite phenomena can be located within the creative swirl of the physical world, are, in a word, embarrassing. I view myself as a defender of the humanities, not a traitor. I have been trying to show how our understanding and our appreciation of consciousness, free will and ethics, religion, and the arts *grows* when it is grounded in a detailed understanding of the relevant science. It is possible, of course, to contribute to our understanding of these beloved phenomena without paying any heed to the questions scientists raise about them; but when an unscientific perspective drifts into an anti-scientific perspective (as it frequently does), the result tends to be either obscurantism or mythmaking. Each of the topics I just mentioned has bulwarks apparently designed to deflect the probes of science: qualia and ‘intrinsic intentionality’; *agent causation* and other forms of frankly mysterious indeterminism; the systematic incomprehensibility of religious doctrines and practice (only those with ‘faith’ are *qualified* to investigate); and the ‘ineffability’ of artistic meaning and genius. Some philosophers brandish these doctrines like crucifixes in the face of a vampire, but those who reject such dodges are making genuine advances in understanding, typically by clarifying, refining, extending, and when it is called for, rebutting the analyses and theories of other scientists who now dare to approach these hallowed precincts.

In 2003 I published *Freedom Evolves*, an elaboration and extension of the ideas about free will first defended in *Elbow Room* (1984). The main novelties in it were a new treatment of determinism, thanks to my collaboration with Christopher Taylor, the brilliant pianist whose forays into philosophy are as uncompromising and powerful as his musical explorations, and

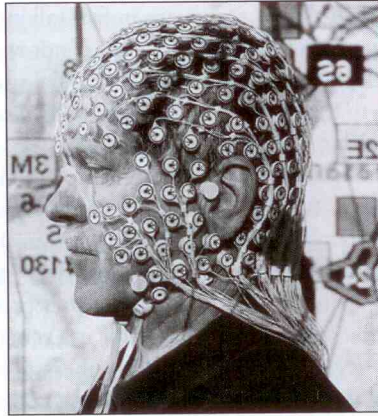
an expanded account of the role of evolution in creating “the varieties of free will worth wanting.”

The same year I published an op/ed piece in the *New York Times* about being an atheist, and about the new term for us, ‘brights’, coined by Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert to highlight the parallels between the millions of closeted atheists and the millions of no longer so closeted gays. Few commentators have approved of the term; but then, few commentators initially approved of the appropriation of the term ‘gay’ by homosexuals either, and they were eventually proven wrong: I doubt any single word has ever done more to transform the public imagination than the word ‘gay’. My short piece triggered a flood of thousands of emails and letters, overwhelmingly positive (along with a significant volume of hate mail and death threats). Many of the missives urged me to write more about religion, at a time when aggressive religious conservatives were threatening to impose as much of their brand of religiosity on the USA as possible. I had no interest in canvassing arguments for the non-existence of God, or writing about the prospects for atheism – a term which will, I’m sure, eventually become as unnecessary as ‘round-earthism’. I had, however, developed an interest in how religions have evolved, so I set aside all my other projects and devoted the next two years to researching and writing *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, published in 2006. It’s not really a philosophy book at all, although it has some philosophical analysis and argumentation. Since this was also a time of many exciting new developments on consciousness and the brain, I was torn between this project and my first love, but even though I am now desperately playing catch-up on all the work on consciousness that emerged during my working vacation for *Breaking the Spell*, and am all too aware of how thin I have spread myself in recent years, I don’t regret having taken on this additional topic. As it happens, I was not alone in making the ultimately political decision to devote some serious effort to countering the prevailing attitudes regarding religion, and I am proud to be counted one of the Unholy Trinity or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (it depends on who’s counting), along with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. I am often regarded as the odd one out, and there is a difference in tone between my book and their books as well as a difference in agenda, but I have almost no substantive disagreements with their claims. I set out to change some minds, and I get a gratifying number of messages from people who tell me that my book has done just that.

I am often told that mine is the ‘least offensive’ book by the New Atheists. It is true that I went out of my way to avoid gratuitous insult; but the fact is that people have no right to protection of their fragile sensibilities regarding their faith. Religious

allegiance has ramifications too important to be out of bounds to rational inquiry. There is no polite way of saying "Excuse me, but have you ever considered the possibility that you've devoted your life to a fantasy, and blinded yourself to the moral dubiety of your allegiance to a institution that does more harm than good?" But we need to ask people this question in as many different ways as it takes to capture people's attention.

Now, in 2008, the corner seems to have been turned. In just the last two years dozens of utterly ignorable and forgettable books have been published attacking the New Atheists – a sure sign that their message is being heeded – yet the ranks of public agnostics and atheists now outnumber the years of Methuselah. We are not quite ready to elect a bright to national office, but bright senators, representatives and governors are in the offing. There is still the large and important project of steering the new openness about religion in effective directions, and I am devoting further time to my project of establishing a system of compulsory education about the world's religions for all children in the United States, on the grounds that the toxic forms of religious fanaticism all depend on the enforced ignorance of the young. Oblige their elders to inform them about the varieties of religion, and lack of religion, in the world, and they will find it much more difficult



to indoctrinate the children under their authority.

I am still finding time to work on my primary goal of enlarging our understanding of how our brains generate the phenomena of consciousness. My collection of essays, *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness* (2005), was something of a progress report. But more is in the works, along with supporting work on such under-studied phenomena as humor and delusions. The whole shebang was almost brought to a close in October 2006 when my aorta suddenly 'dissected' (the inner lining separated from the outer, creating an aneurysm that is usually fatal in a few hours). Fortunately, swift and brilliant medical intervention not only saved my life but gave me some bionic replacements, a carbon-fiber aortic valve and a Dacron aorta, that have me back in action – not just at my desk, but on my tractor, racing my sailboat, and playing third-rate golf. 2009 will be Darwin Year all around the world, and I will be dashing around trying to say new and interesting things about the many illuminations of our lives made possible by Darwin's "strange inversion of reasoning."

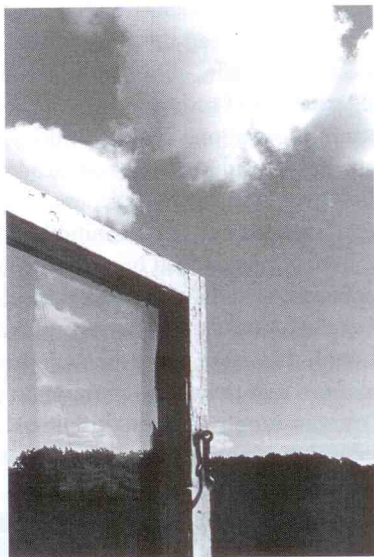
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