

MAY 10, 2013

Interview with Dan Dennett

Daniel “Dan” Dennett III is an [American philosopher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_philosophy) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_philosophy), writer and cognitive scientist. His research is primarily focused on the philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. He is currently the Co-director of the [Center for Cognitive Studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Center_for_Cognitive_Studies) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Dennett), the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, and a University Professor at [Tufts University](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=42.406949,-71.11982&spn=0.01,0.01&q=42.406949,-71.11982(Tufts%20University)&t=h) ([http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=42.406949,-71.11982&spn=0.01,0.01&q=42.406949,-71.11982\(Tufts%20University\)&t=h](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=42.406949,-71.11982&spn=0.01,0.01&q=42.406949,-71.11982(Tufts%20University)&t=h)).

Dennett is an outspoken [Atheist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism>) & Secularist who is considered to be one of the “Four Horsemen” along with the late Christopher Hitchens, [Sam Harris](http://www.samharris.org) (<http://www.samharris.org>) & [Richard Dawkins](http://richarddawkins.net/) (<http://richarddawkins.net/>). His views on consciousness are of particular interest to me, so I reached out to him and managed to interview him via e-mail a few weeks back.

I think his answers to my questions are of great value and certainly shed some light on issues discussed here on Volitions.

Q: What is the greatest problem facing the field of philosophy right now, in your opinion?

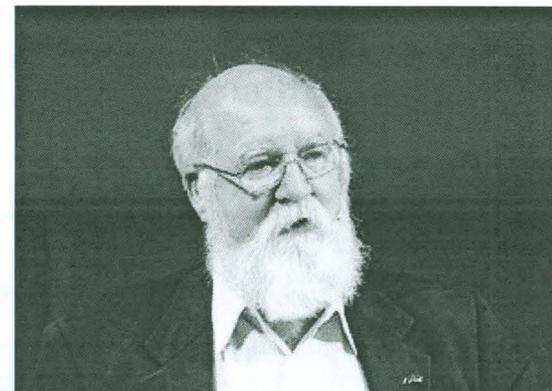
A: It is not held in very high regard in the sciences—or in many quarters in the humanities, curiously enough, and for more or less opposite reasons! Some in the humanities see philosophers today as scientist wannabes trying to analyze their pet topics to death, and some in the sciences view philosophy as sciencephobic navel-gazing, with neither evidence nor method for what they do. But even more curiously, I rather prefer this ‘underdog’ position of philosophers to the vaunted status that many philosophers have enjoyed in the past, as Great Wise Men (note the gender) who must be approached with all due deference. The fact is that there is lots of good philosophy being done by well-informed and rigorous thinkers in many fields. It just doesn’t fit the stereotypes of philosophy that outsiders have.

Q: You are a confirmed compatibilist on free will, what does that mean specifically?

A: It means that free will—in the important sense, the only sense that matters, the sense that is a precondition for moral responsibility—has nothing to do with determinism or indeterminism (it’s compatible with determinism, enough said), and amounts to what we may call moral competence. People who are not morally competent for one reason or another (they have been rendered unable to be appropriately moved by reasons, to put it briefly) lack free will, and deserve our sympathy and pity, but not punishment. But others, of sound mind, do have free will even though their every decision is caused (of course!) by events in their brains that were caused in turn by prior events, etc.

Q: You are also an outspoken Atheist, however, do you believe in any type of spirituality without [God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God>)? If so, describe it.

A: “Spirituality” is a nice word. It connotes seriousness. modesty. curiosity. joy. respect. depth of feeling—all good things. But I think the popularity of the term



(http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Daniel_Dennett.jpg)

English: Daniel Dennett at the 17. Göttinger Literaturherbst, October 19th, 2008, in Göttingen, Germany. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

is largely due to being a stand-in for “faith”. Once one no longer believes in a [personal God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_god) (and I tell you very few people actually believe in a personal God), instead of saying what is then the flat and unvarnished truth (“I’m an atheist”) they say “Well, I don’t believe in the traditional God, but I’m very spiritual in my own way.” People should not be so afraid of saying “yes, of course I’m an atheist, and I don’t believe in the [Easter Bunny](http://www.marthastewart.com/335007/bunny-craft-ideas) either, but that doesn’t mean I’m shallow, or immoral.” The idea that believing in God makes you a better person is, if you think about it, quite a ridiculous idea. It maybe used to help people be better than they otherwise would have been, but no longer. Throw away the crutch. You really don’t need it.

Q: How would you explain your view on consciousness to someone who has never studied philosophy or the sciences?

A: Slowly and carefully. Read my books. There are no shortcuts.

If you are interested in learning more about consciousness or reading up on Dennett’s views, check out his books, “[Consciousness Explained](http://www.amazon.com/Consciousness-Explained-Daniel-C-Dennett/dp/0316180661)”, “[Freedom Evolves](http://www.amazon.com/Consciousness-Explained-Daniel-C-Dennett/dp/0316180661)”, or “[The Mind’s I](http://www.amazon.com/Minds-Fantasies-Reflections-Self-Soul/dp/0465030912).”

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One comment

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[Sreejit Poole](http://ofmindormatter.wordpress.com)

Very interesting interview, not that I can agree with all the points, but very nicely put. Thanks for sharing.