

Calling in the Cartesian loans

Daniel C. Dennett

Center for Cognitive Studies, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155.

ddennett@tufts.edu

<http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/~ddennett.htm>

Abstract: Wegner's tactic of describing the conscious mind as if it inhabited a Cartesian Theater in the brain is a stopgap solution that needs to be redeemed by paying off these loans of comprehension. Just how does Wegner propose to recast his points?

Three quotations from Wegner's (2002) book, each not just defensible but, I think, importantly insightful, take out Cartesian loans that are now overdue.

"We can't possibly know (let alone keep track of) the tremendous number of mechanical influences on our behavior because we inhabit an extraordinarily complicated machine" (p. 27). These machines "we inhabit" simplify things for our benefit. Who or what is this "we" that inhabits the brain? A Cartesian ghost in the machine? Surely not, in spite of first appearances.

"Conscious will is particularly useful, then, as a guide to ourselves" (p. 328). Again, who or what uses this handy guide? Does one part of the brain use another part? Is it as simple as that?

"Illusory or not, conscious will is the person's guide to his or her own moral responsibility for action" (p. 341). My body is causally responsible for whatever effects emanate from it, whether it is falling down a flight of stairs, or pulling the trigger of a gun, but I, the person "inhabiting" this body, am morally responsible only for my actions. Again, who is this person and what is he doing in my body?

I have defended Wegner's tactic of temporarily indulging in these ways of speaking, and sketched a way for him to recast his points without relying on the ominous image of a Cartesian Theater in which the Self sits as Witness and Decision-Maker (Dennett 2003a; 2003b; 2003c). But I would like to see how he himself proposes to pay off these comprehension-loans, since he may have some other tricks up his sleeve.