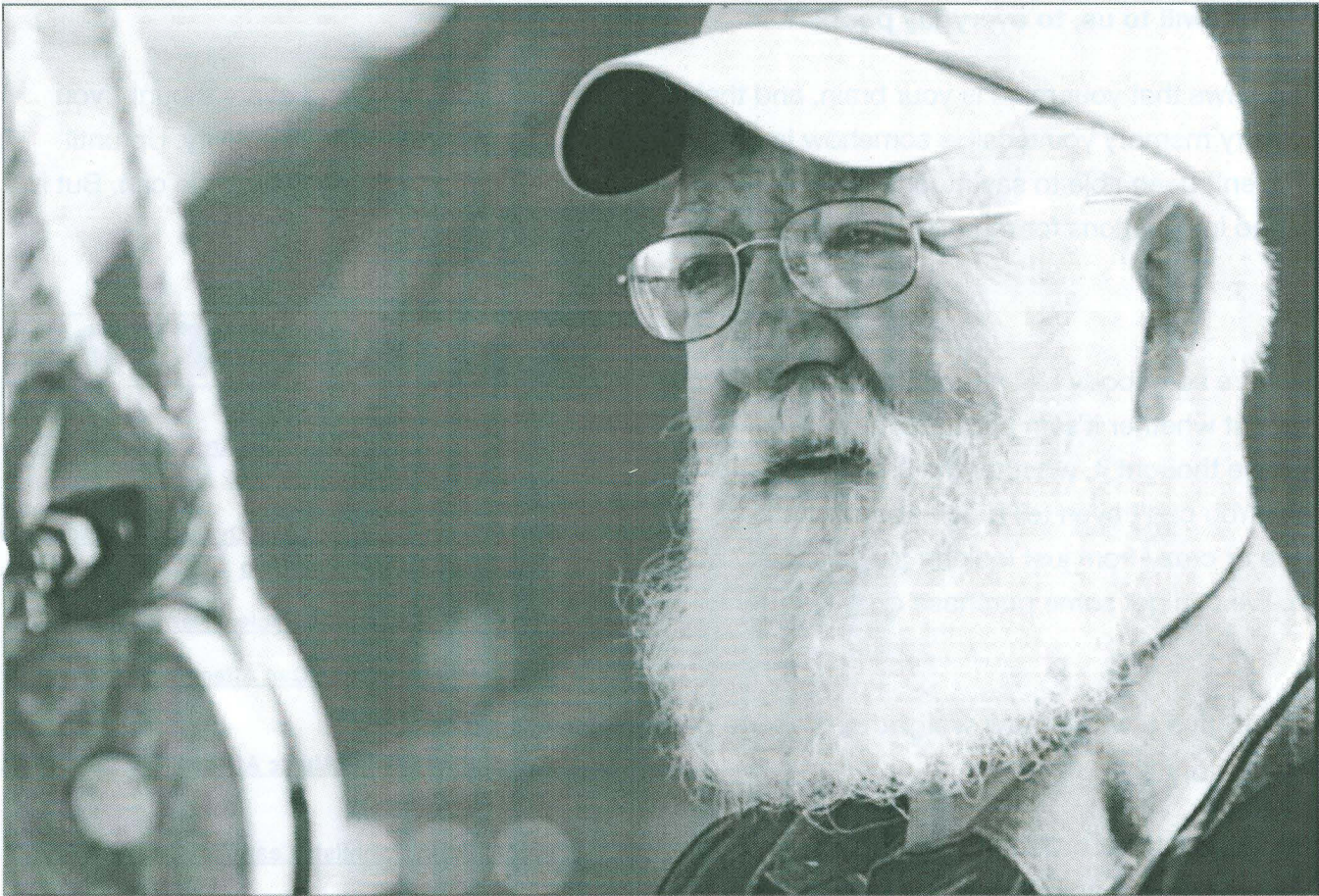


CommonHealth

Ask A Philosopher: What Does New Brain Science Mean For Free Will?



Tufts philosophy professor Daniel C. Dennett on a schooner in Greenland in June. (Courtesy of Phil Wickens)

More than once lately, brain scientists have told me, “You won’t get your answer here. That’s the purview of philosophy.”

The drill goes like this: They boggle my mind with the ways they’re beginning to be able to dissect and tweak the brain processes that underlie our moral selves, from decisions to judgments to feelings. I eventually ask something like, “But if it’s all the brain, if it’s all biology, then what does that mean for free will? For moral responsibility? Blame for bad deeds? Credit for good?” And they reply, a bit apologetically, “That’s not a scientific question. It’s a normative one. Try philosophy.”

So I did. I reached Tufts University philosophy professor Daniel C. Dennett on an island off the coast of Maine. A seasoned veteran of the free-will debate — see his recent **back-and-forth** with **“Free Will” author Sam Harris** — he courteously interrupted his sailing and writing and ocean-gazing to field my frustrated questions. Our conversation, lightly edited:

Given that we now know — and can even perturb — some of the brain mechanisms of morality, and we see perhaps more clearly than ever that this is biological, what are the implications for blame, credit and free will to us, to everyday people?

First, it's no news that your mind is your brain, and that every decision you make and every thought you have and every memory you recall is somehow lodged in your brain and involves brain activity. Up until now, we haven't been able to say much more than that. Now, it's getting to the point where we can. But it has almost no implications for morality and free will.

Why not?

Knowing where somebody has a thought doesn't tell you anything about whether it's an evil thought, whether they shouldn't have thought it, whether they have their wits about them. You can't even tell much about whether they're sane or crazy from just looking at the activity of their brain. We can get some purchase on that, but not much.

But doesn't it give a whole new weight to the idea of 'Blame the brain, not me'?

Somebody wrote a book called 'My Brain Made Me Do It,' and I thought, 'What an outrageous title! Unless it's being ironic.' Of course my brain made me do it! What would you want, your stomach to make you do it?

If you said, 'My mind made me do it,' then people would say, 'Yes, right.' In other words, you're telling me you did this on purpose, you knew what you were doing. Well, if you do something on purpose and you know what you're doing and you did it for reasons good, bad or indifferent, then your brain made you do it, of course. It doesn't follow that you were not the author of that deed. Why? Because *you are your embodied brain*.

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You see, what's hiding here, and it's hiding actually in plain sight, is the leftover dualism, the leftover Cartesianism of the 17th century: The idea that a person is an immaterial soul or ego or 'thinking thing,' as Descartes called it, that unless some act is caused by this pearl of specialness, then it isn't a deed. That's just preposterous and you don't need fancy neuroscience to learn that. There is no little homunculus in your brain who is you or your ego, and there is no little *res cogitans*, no soul in there that's pushing the buttons and deciding what to do next. The whole brain is involved in controlling your body, and if your brain makes you do it, that's just the way it should work.

The leftover dualism — I would imagine this comes from how things feel. It feels to us, we have this tremendous illusion that there is a homunculus or little controller in there.

We have been fooled, deluded, by our own experience, to some degree. It feels like we're sitting there in a little inner theater watching an inner show and deciding whether we like the show and deciding on the basis of what we see on the stage what we should do next. That's an illusion. There is no inner theater. There is no inner show. There are things that are rather like an inner show, things going on in the brain, but it's not in Technicolor or in Dualismcolor either.

And people are shocked when they encounter this because they are used to the dualism idea — that you've got the body and the mind, and the mind is distinct from the body and is made of entirely different stuff. But no, the mind is part of the body. It is the nervous system plus some other parts that play big roles by being a sounding board for the nervous system. So, embodied minds — that's what we are.

I've found myself saying to neuroscientists that I have this old Biblical idea of morality that must have been instilled in me during my childhood Bible classes. It portrays mortality as a battle between the angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other. And we as humans are supposed to use our higher selves to choose the good. They tend to say, 'There's only your brain.' But then I keep saying, 'But there's your more recent brain and there's your reptilian brain.' I grant you that many of us find the biblical view very outmoded, but what do we replace it with? Because it does feel like there are times when we can rise above and choose the better thing, and we should.

Yes, and actually philosophers have had a pretty good handle on this for a quite a while, long before brain science came along to reinvent the wheel. We give children, or we should give children, a sort of moral education. They learn from their elders what to do and why. This is acquired knowledge, or it's acquired behavioral tendencies — let's call it that and leave knowledge out of it. People learn how to be good and how to be bad, and they learn the difference. And this is all embodied in their brain one way or another.

Now, it turns out that there's a lot of variation in how readily some people succumb to temptation. Some people almost always give in to temptation. They just have very little capacity to find that higher perspective from which you can say, 'Wait a minute, I really don't want to do this because if I get in the habit of doing this it will turn me into a bad person.' That's a perfectly real perspective, there's nothing

mysterious about it, and it's embodied in your brain just the way everything else is embodied in your brain. But it's variable in its strength and cogency in individuals. That's why we have a moral education — to give people the sort of tools for thinking to make the right choices under difficult circumstances.

But then it does bring you back to the question of blame. Because if you just happen to have been born with a worse capacity to look at that longer term, then that's not fair. How can I blame you if you have succumbed to this weakness you were born with?

First of all, although we are born with strengths and weaknesses, we can also change them or others can change them for us. Like Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow test. The bad news is that some kids just reach for that marshmallow — they have very little self-control. The good news is that there are non-invasive ways of educating and training kids so that they develop self-control. And so if the kid says, 'Well, I was born that way.' Well, why didn't you do something about it, why did your parents not do something about it?

Of course, luck is always there. It's an imperfect world. We wouldn't really want it any other way. We do the best we can with what we've got.

Some people are, through no fault of their own, are simply not competent to be moral agents, so we put them in institutions, we take care of them, and we don't allow them to hold positions of responsibility. We sort of treat them like infants because they don't have the wherewithal. But the ones that do have the wherewithal do have the wherewithal — they have the power of reflection and self-control. And we can expect them to use it. We brace them up a little bit and say, 'Look, you want the freedom of the road, you want to be a citizen with all the rights and opportunities of citizenship? Then learn to behave yourself.' And it works.

There are always people who succumb. And then what should happen to them? First of all, we shouldn't be over-impressed with the fact that they're saying 'I can't help it, I was born this way.' Well, if that's really true, then we'll take away your rights of citizenship and put you in an institution, is that what you want? I don't think so.

Research has found that when people are exposed to neuroscience, they give criminals shorter prison sentences. Becoming familiar with brain biology, and the added questions it raises about free will, seems to make people interested somewhat less in retribution and more in pragmatic concerns like deterring crime and keeping the streets safer. Do you think that's a good thing?

Some of it is at least pretty sound research, but I don't think it has the implications that some people want to draw from it. There is a move afoot in some scientific quarters to decide that the whole idea of punishment, or moral responsibility, has been disproven by science. It hasn't — not at all. Those are freshman-grade errors of reasoning. Responsibility is alive and well and will go on being alive and well.

Tom Wolfe, the novelist and commentator, has this wonderful line where he says: “The conclusion people out beyond the laboratory walls are drawing is:...We’re all hardwired... Don’t blame me! I’m wired wrong!” Some people are wired wrong, but some people are wired right. The fact that we’re wired doesn’t show that we’re wired wrong. This is something the neuroscientists have to come to grips with.

Some people are indeed wired wrong and we treat them differently, whether they’re insane, demented, developmentally challenged, psychopathic, or uncontrollably impulsive. We do identify people and we distinguish that they are not normal. They have deficits; they have problems that remove competence from them. Those people are wired wrong. But that doesn’t mean everybody is wired wrong. That step from ‘Well, those folks can’t help it, but they have brains and we have brains, so I guess we can’t help it either’ — that’s just bad reasoning.

The question that neuroscience raises when it gives us more granular detail about cause and effect. This is a question that’s already millennia old: How can there be free will if everything basically works on cause and effect? So now we have a new layer on that age-old argument, which is that we can see more about the actual workings of the brain. Do you see that adding anything or is it the same-old same-old?

In one sense, it’s the same-old same-old. It doesn’t show that we don’t have free will, but it does show something interesting. And that is: An important element of free will, not often publicly and articulately or explicitly discussed, but an important one, is that we keep our thinking to ourselves. We want to have certain privacy about our thoughts, because if we wear our hearts on our sleeves all the time, then people will exploit that. They’ll charge us too much for everything we buy. If they know too much about what we’re thinking, if they can read our minds, then we are to some degree disabled as agents. There’s a very important moral to this story that’s not too hard to follow. If your head is in an fMRI machine, don’t play rock-paper-scissors for money. That’s about the only practical moral.

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