

# Sophia

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*Dangerous Ideas: The Sophia Interview with Daniel  
C. Dennett*

*Daniel C. Dennett is Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, and Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. He was born in Boston in 1942 and received his B.A. in philosophy from Harvard in 1963, where he studied with the great American philosopher W.V.O. Quine. He then went to Oxford where he completed the D.Phil. in philosophy in 1965, under the supervision of Gilbert Ryle. He taught at U.C. Irvine (along with our own E.-H.W. Kluge) from 1965 to 1971. He then moved to Tufts, where he has taught ever since. He has held visiting professorships at Harvard, Pittsburgh, Oxford, and the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. Dr. Dennett's philosophical interests are in the areas of Philosophy of Mind, Cognitive Science, Philosophy of Biology and Free Will theory. He has also made contributions in the areas of Aesthetics and Ethics. He is the author of many books, including: Freedom Evolves, Kinds of Minds, Darwin's Dangerous Idea, Consciousness Explained, and The Intentional Stance, among many others. He lives with his wife in North Andover, Massachusetts, and has a daughter, a son, and a grandson. Interviewed by Anthony Kulic, Senior Editor.*

*Sophia* - We often hear it stated that the history of western philosophy is a chronicle marked by philosophers of different eras repeatedly "re-inventing the wheel". Do you agree, and is it important that students of philosophy learn about the history of philosophy?

**Dan Dennett** - Yes, and I do think that philosophy is in a class by itself as a field of theoretical research; chemists and physicists and astronomers and biologists, for instance, really don't *need* to know the history of their fields (though of course it can be a great help to them) the way philosophers *need* to know the history of their field. The reason can be vividly expressed in a slogan: the history of philosophy is mainly the history of tempting mistakes. Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hume, Mill, and all the rest were incredibly intelligent thinkers and *still* they made major mistakes that it has taken centuries to understand and correct. Any philosopher who doesn't have some fairly deep familiarity with those mistakes is almost certain to find them just as irresistible as they did. My conviction that this is so has been amply borne out in recent years as I have watched brilliant neuroscientists and others *over-confidently* leap into the abyss and re-invent the great philosophical mistakes in their attempts to solve the mind body problem.

*S* - I recently had a professor comment that he considered W.V.O. Quine's, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" as arguably the most influential work in modern analytic philosophy. You studied with Quine shortly after its publication. Do you consider "Two Dogmas" a watershed event in the history of analytic philosophy? Are there watershed events in contemporary philosophy?

**DD** - Yes, "Two Dogmas" was a defining event, and unfortunately we now see the tide of essentialistic and aprioristic thinking rising again, inexorably, threatening to drown the insights we gained from Quine. If anything, he underestimated the fatal attractions of the dogmas. Maybe it's in the genes of those who want to become philosophers! I don't see anything as central and as crucial as "Two Dogmas" in more recent philosophy, but I may not be appreciating something that I'm taking for granted.

*S - Your approach to philosophy is strongly influenced by modern science and your primary areas of philosophical interest (i.e. mind/cognitive science, biology) are themselves domains of scientific inquiry. How do you view the role of philosophy among these and other scientific pursuits?*

**DD** - I think philosophy ought to be considered to be entirely continuous with science in these areas, the 'conceptual end of the spectrum' as it were, engaged in the most abstract problems about theories and their implications and constraints, with experimental and other empirical data-gathering at the other extreme. Thus the sort of traditional philosophy of mind that is now making something of a comeback is, in my opinion, a potentially valuable exercise of some possible use to theoreticians, but only if it is viewed as what it can only be: aprioristic auto-anthropology, working out the implications of the intuitions of the folk, using oneself as one's informant. The idea that the 'results' of such inquiries might actually directly constrain and guide (or refute!) scientific theories of the mind strikes me as incredibly naive—as if one would think folk physics could overrule academic physics.

*S - Are there limitations to what science can tell us? Is there relevant work being done today in contemporary metaphysics, and should we look to philosophy to inform our ontology?*

**DD** - I view analytic metaphysics as itself a form of aprioristic auto-anthropology. That does not make it negligible. It is worth finding out if there is a consistent theory to be generated from those aspects of our manifest image, to use Sellars' useful term. If there is, it is a worthy *candidate* for adoption by science, but I don't think consistency is enough (and I doubt very much if our folk metaphysics is any more consistent than our folk physics, which defies formalization). Analytic metaphysics has one glaring weakness: its blindness to counterintuitive possibilities. There is room for revolutionary thinking in metaphysics, but not much leverage to sustain the revolution. Many people thought of one or another version of the idea of evolution by natural selection before Darwin, but nobody knew how or whether to take it seriously until he provided the empirical support that made it impossible NOT to take it seriously.

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*S - Jerry Fodor has recently commented that nobody apart from academics reads "Anglophone analytic philosophy" anymore, whereas continental and postmodern philosophers continue to hold their market. You, however, seem to be an anomaly in this regard. Assuming Fodor is correct, why do you think that nobody is interested in analytic philosophy and how do you account for your relative success?*

**DD** - Simple: I follow the principle that Pat Churchland now calls Dennett's Rule, as formulated in my advice to graduate students, "Higher-Order Truths of Chmess" (Chmess is my made-up name for chess played with a king that can move two steps, not one, in any direction. It is probably not worth playing, but there are an infinity of truths of chmess) on my website, at: <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/chmess.htm>

"One good test to make sure you're not just exploring the higher order truths of chmess is to see if people aside from philosophers actually play the game. Can anybody outside of academic philosophy be made to *care* whether you're right about whether Jones's counterexample works against Smith's principle? Another such test is to try to teach the stuff to uninitiated undergraduates. If they don't "get it," you really should consider the hypothesis that you're following a self-supporting community of experts into an artifactual trap."

So long as young philosophers court only the interest of their fellow philosophers (and not even their undergraduate students!), they are almost guaranteed to waste their lives on non-issues that are little more than intellectual jungle gyms for demonstrating extreme cleverness. Some philosophers actually make a virtue of this, spurning any topic that arouses a more general academic interest and priding themselves on writing books and articles that only a coterie of initiates can hope to penetrate. I can think of books and articles that were apparently written for an audience that cannot exceed a dozen potential readers in the entire world. Their authors would presumably think it was *infra dig* to attempt to reach a wider portion of *hoi polloi*. I gather that some of them refuse to take my arguments seriously just because they are written in a way that makes them accessible to wider audiences—their jocular refusals have often been quoted to me. This results in some curious patterns. For instance, my own contribution to the rather arcane issues of mental causation, overdetermination and epiphenomenalism,

the thought experiment “Two Black Boxes,” has been almost entirely ignored by the philosophers working on the topic, because it appeared in *DARWIN'S DANGEROUS IDEA*, which they figure they need not read since they think it is a trade book about evolution, not serious academic philosophy. So while perhaps half a million people have read the thought experiment, and understood it, the philosophers to whom it was directed are not among them! I guess I'll have to publish a “technical” and hard-to-read version of it in an academic journal some day.

*S - The scientific picture of reality (physics) ostensibly precludes the possibility of free will, whereas our brute phenomenal experience dictates otherwise. As a result, the problem of free will is often framed as a (false) dilemma: it is either true that we have free will, and our science is simply missing something, or it is false that we have free will, and we are simply caught in the grip of a grand illusion. Your conception of free will resides somewhere in the excluded middle of this purported quandary. How should we conceive of free will on your view?*

**DD** - My long answer, found in *FREEDOM EVOLVES*, defies summary, of course (else why write a whole book about it?). *But*, with that caveat, here's the summary: What worries people about the scientific picture of reality given us by physics is that even in its indeterministic versions it seems to make our futures *inevitable*. This is simply confused. I take inevitability, and its negation—*evitability*, a term I would like to elevate to high currency—to be the key to understanding free will, and to understand evitability, you need biology, not physics. Evitability has evolved on this planet, and it has nothing whatever to do with the determinism or indeterminism of physics. The simplest living organisms have some minute powers of evitability, staving off death till they can reproduce; larger, fancier organisms have significant degrees of freedom—the freedom of a bird to fly wherever it wants, for instance. Our freedom is greater still, by orders of magnitude. We are freer than our parts, cells, which are as tropistic and “automaton-like” as the earliest life forms. It takes evolutionary theory to understand this, not physics.

*S - I recently watched a popular documentary that had as its central theme the idea that quantum theory has vindicated free will, enabling us to*

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*understand that there is no objective reality, only free conscious choices made by individuals that determine a purely subjective reality. The film was full of short sound bites by physicists and other scientists that supported this view. Is this view representative of current scientific thought on free will and reality? In brief, how do you respond to purported "quantum" explanations of free will?*

**DD** - I think they're all bogus, and poorly thought out, for reasons I expound at great length in *FREEDOM EVOLVES* (see especially chapter 4, which is an extended analysis of the best version of the quantum idea I could find.) You are pointing to a classic case of the point I made above about tempting mistakes being irresistible to smart people who haven't done their philosophical homework. A PhD in physics or mathematics doesn't make you immune to the philosophical confusions that have enticed the great philosophers over the two millennia plus since Democritus and his colleagues first floated the forlorn indeterminism idea.

*S - Modern cultural evolutionary theory provides us with some compelling theoretical models for explaining how cultures and societies may have arisen in their modern form. The received view attributes the level of a group's overall fitness as proportional to, among other factors, the degree of cooperation among members within the group, with higher levels of cooperation conferring higher group fitness. Given that we now have a plausible explanatory account of society, what are its implications to normative ethics? Is there any reason to believe that there is one correct ethical system?*

**DD** - It's not as straightforward as that. The recent wave of research on the evolution of cooperation and related topics does indeed inform ethics, and changes the tasks that confront philosophers. Those who choose to ignore this work will be making the same mistake as the traditionalist philosophers of mind who turn their backs on cognitive science. But it is still true that "you can't derive ought from is" in some version or other, so the theories, explanations and other empirical discoveries you speak of do not just settle (or render gratuitous) the traditional questions of ethics. Is there a correct ethical system? I would rather say we can strive, as Alan Gibbard puts it, for "parochiality over the widest parish". Achieving such consensus is a political

process, not a process of discovery, though it would be enabled by the sharing of what we can learn about ourselves from empirical research.

*S - Are you still puzzled in any way by the phenomenon of consciousness?*

**DD** - Sure. Puzzled, not mystified. There are plenty of wide-open questions and areas of troubling ignorance for me. I wish I could articulate a crisper, more detailed and realistic model of the architecture of human consciousness. In particular, installing the motivational dynamics on the one hand and the generativity of content on the other, are huge tasks for the future. Two thinkers whose work at least points in the right directions on these two topics are, respectively, George Ainslie (*Breakdown of Will*) and Chris Eliasmith (U. of Waterloo), "Moving Beyond Metaphors" in *The Journal of Philosophy* (v. C, 10, Oct. 2003). These thinkers, like the others I admire, are not wallowing in mysterianism or picking through the scrap heap of folk psychology for clues. They're boldly launching counterintuitive ideas to see where they lead.

*S - Over the last century or two there have been many calls for scientific philosophy (Peirce, Dewey, Carnap), and several notable attempts to establish such a thing, none of which has ultimately succeeded. What, on your view, are the prospects for scientific philosophy? Are you a scientific philosopher?*

**DD** - As I've often said, philosophy is what you do when you don't yet know what the right questions are, and that state of affairs is simply not amenable to "scientific" investigation. There are no algorithms or recipes or decision procedures for making progress. In that regard, philosophy is unavoidably informal—an "art" not a science. And so, in my opinion, well-meant attempts by philosophers to be scientific ("exact philosophy" for instance) are almost guaranteed to suffer from what I have rudely called the heartbreak of premature formalization. (Pete Richerson, the evolutionary modeler, has said that mathematics is like sex—really important, but that doesn't mean you should do it in public. A lot of formalist philosophy violates that useful maxim.) But notice that I said "almost guaranteed", not certain, and in part my dislike for this kind of philosophy may be due to my impatience with formalisms, which I'm not very good at, and when I do work through them they never seem to me to be doing much 'work'. (The actual progress, the



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innovation, all happens in the setup, and if scant attention is paid to that framing—and the practitioners often take it as a point of honor to be as brisk and minimalistic as they can in introducing their formalizations—then all the interesting stuff is backstage.)

*S - It is unsettling, as a close neighbour, to see the level of religiosity in the United States; in particular, the degree with which religious groups have become significant actors in U.S. politics—effectively occupying a seat in the Oval Office. This is, to be sure, cause for alarm to those concerned with enlightenment principles and the view that a society ought to promote free, rational inquiry. Are you concerned about the influence of the Christian right in the U.S., and if so, what issues are you most concerned about?*

**DD** - Oh yes, I'm concerned. And I've taken the last two years to write a book on religion as a natural phenomenon. Entitled *BREAKING THE SPELL*, it will be published in the fall by Viking Penguin.

*S - To wrap things up, what are the new projects you are currently working on? What can we expect from Dan Dennett in the not-too-distant future?*

**DD** - I've just told you what to expect in the "distant future". Even more immediately (before this interview is published in fact) you will find MIT Press issuing *SWEET DREAMS: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*, my Nicod (and Daewoo) Lectures on consciousness and cognitive science, where I develop in much more detail some of my responses to your questions.