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FREE WILL

MORALITY

CONSCIOUSNESS

THE INTRACTABLES

THE TOUGHEST OF THE TOUGH

TPM PRESENTS THE INTRACTABLES STARRING SIMON BLACKBURN DANIEL C DENNETT MIRANDA FRICKER A C GRAYLING ANTHONY O'HEAR AND BHIKHU PAREKH ALSO STARRING MELVYN BRAGG JENNY COLGAN ALASTAIR HANNAY JONATHAN REE AND INTRODUCING MARK ROWLANDS

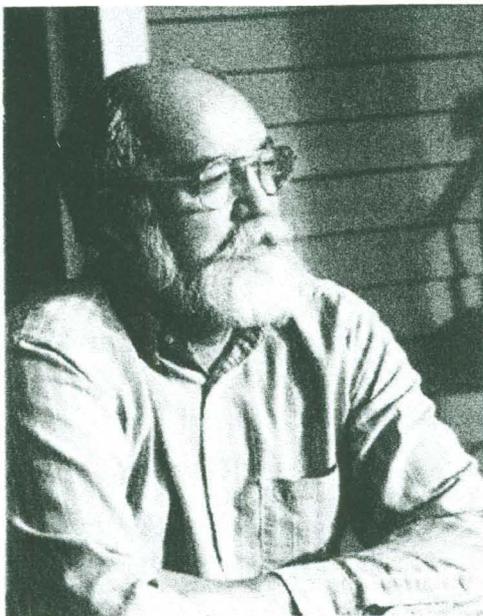
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Thought provoking thoughts



Dennett's dangerous ideas

Julian Baggini meets the man for whom intractable is a dirty word

If you've ever been in a room full of top-rank professionals where everyone is insistent that something is impossible, and then someone pipes up and says he's already done it, you'll know how the air suddenly changes. Whatever happens next is going to be extremely embarrassing. Either this guy is a fool, in which case his pending humiliation is going to be painful to watch; or he's a hero, in which case all the other so-called experts are going to have red faces.

Now imagine that there are two different things everyone is saying can't be done and the maverick claims to have sorted out both of them. You don't need to be a professional psychologist to predict the reactions. Some people may be ready to hail him as a genius, but a lot of people are going to want him to be wrong, if only to salvage their professional pride.

One such room is academic philosophy, and two problems almost everyone considers tough nuts to crack, if not indeed intractable, are those of consciousness and free will. Daniel Dennett, however, claims that not only are both quite tractable, but that he is, if you will, the philosophical tractor. In *Consciousness*

Explained (1991) and *Freedom Evolves* (2003), Dennett has taken on two of the biggest conundrums in contemporary philosophy and claimed, if not knock-outs, then clear victories on points.

"My first suspicion when people say that these problems are intractable is that they are happy they are intractable, they want to keep it that way," Dennett told me in Boston. "And of course saying that it's intractable is a pretty good way of discouraging people from looking further. This is sometimes transparent, as is the case with the problem of consciousness. You have people like McGinn and Fodor saying 'This is insoluble – go play tennis'. It's palpable that they're afraid we might solve them and they don't want that to happen."

I wish I could report more of Dennett's sparkling, bullish conversation. But something went very wrong. Thankfully, however, it went wrong in an almost poetic way. For the story of this interview can in some ways serve as a metaphor for Dennett's model of consciousness.

The way in which a standard interview is written up reflects what Dennett calls the view of the mind as the "Cartesian theatre". On this model, the mind has a single locus of conscious awareness, which observes events in the outside world unfolding as a more or less seamless, continuous narrative, and which has privileged access to the contents of its own

Julian Baggini's latest book is *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Granta) www.julianbaggini.com

mind. So ingrained is this model in our view of ourselves that it passes for common sense, and has even been taken as one of the basic facts about consciousness which any theory has to explain.

So, take as an example the experience of interviewing Daniel Dennett. I am there watching and listening to him, and my inner experience is like a film of the scene rolling before my mind's eye. Although my experience is seamless, my memory, of course, is not. But that is just an artefact of my limited capacities of recall. So when I play back the tape of my interview, I am recreating the audio part of the original experience. The tape does what my memory would do if it were more powerful.

For Dennett, this view of the mind is just wrong. And as if to demonstrate the point, when I get the tape recording of the interview home, I discover that my hitherto trusty Sony recorder has malfunctioned and what I have is 99% hiss, with a few human voices buried underneath. And for all I try, with my own PC and even professional sound engineers, those voices cannot be fully uncovered. I no longer have the tape that buttresses the illusion that the interview was experienced as a continuous, uninterrupted, **one** event.

When I try to reconstruct the interview in my memory, the results are unsatisfactory. Too many details are missing and whole chunks of time are lost. Dennett's surprising claim, however, is that this is in some ways much more like the original experience than a tape recording is. The fact is that I never sat opposite Dennett as though a movie of him talking were playing in my mind. Dennett wants us to reject the Cartesian theatre and replace it with his "multiple drafts model". As Dennett introduced this idea in *Consciousness Explained*, on this view "all varieties of perception – indeed all varieties of thought or mental activity – are accomplished in the brain by parallel, multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs. Information entering the nervous system is under continuous 'editorial revision'."

Consider sitting opposite Dennett and interviewing him. As I do this, all sorts of things are going on in my head. I'm listening to what he is saying. I'm thinking about what to say next. I'm hearing noise from the bar. I'm feeling disappointed my coffee isn't better than it is. James Brown's "I Got Ants In My Pants (And I Need To Dance)" is banging around my head. I'm aware of a growing hunger and I'm wondering what to eat afterwards. A blister on my heel occasionally rubs, alerting me to its presence. And so on.

Of course, we all know that consciousness is messy. But still we tend to interpret this mess in terms of the Cartesian theatre. All these different things, we tell ourselves, are jostling to occupy our "conscious awareness", which is still a single point of view. But according to the multiple drafts model, this tidies up consciousness too much. What we should say

is that there is no single, indivisible point of view which is the locus of consciousness. All sorts of things are going on in parallel, and just as writing and editing creates a record which eliminates much of the messiness of the actual events, so it is only the subsequent "editing" by the mind which gives us the illusion of conscious experience as a single-

track linear process.

The debacle of this interview, however, makes sustaining at least that kind of illusion impossible. What is striking about the illusion of the Cartesian theatre, however, is that if we are careful about how we analyse the real phenomenology of experience – if we really attend to what it is like to be conscious – we find that it plainly isn't as unified as the Cartesian theatre would have us believe. Hume first noticed this when he failed to find introspectively the single, unitary self which Descartes claimed he knew for certain existed. Yet few philosophers since have taken this failure seriously.

"I think that philosophers are often very casual in their introspection and in their assumptions about what the phenomenology actually is," Dennett told me over the phone

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the intractables

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from America some time later, as we tried to reconstruct some key parts of our initial, lost conversation. "There are a lot of surprises out there. So I make a point of rubbing my students' noses in surprise phenomenology. They're astonished to discover how poorly resolved the peripheries of their vision are, the fact that they don't have colour vision all the way out to the sides, and so forth. There are lots of these and I think that a great deal of the work that's done by philosophers of mind of the non-empirical sort is, shall we say, subliminally guided by a set of shared presumptions about what the phenomenology is, which is just false."

In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett argues that the multiple drafts model, coupled with the empirical facts about how the brain actually does the job (many of which we don't yet know), together provide all we need to explain consciousness. Most of his peers, however, remained unconvinced, claiming that anyone buying the book on the basis of its title would be entitled to demand their money back. Dennett, however, stands by his audacious choice of title.

"I don't regret the title at all. I wanted to show people what an explanation of consciousness would be like. I think I sketched out the directions that theories have to take. When we fill in the empirical details we *will* have explained consciousness, and in the meantime we can see what consciousnesses explained would be. I'm quite happy with the title in spite of the fact that even as I anticipated there would be a lot of carping and a lot of stale jokes about how what I'm really doing is explaining consciousness *away*. I really am glad to draw attention to the fallacy these people are making. They're supposing that if you actually do explain consciousness in terms of things that aren't conscious, that's explaining it away. But that's what explanations should do."

For Dennett, such criticisms are as hollow as saying that you can't explain viscosity in molecular terms because molecules aren't viscous.

Or to put it another way, it is like insisting that whatever explains how we see red must be something which is itself red.

At the bottom of this resistance to the kind of explanation Dennett offers is what he sees as a desire to preserve the "magic" of the mind. To illustrate this, he uses a "wonderful quote" from Lee Siegel's *Net of Magic*, a book on Indian street magic:

"I'm writing a book on magic," I explain, and I'm asked, "Real magic?" By real magic people mean miracles, thaumaturgical acts, and supernatural powers. "No," I answer: "Conjuring tricks, not real magic."

Real magic, in other words, refers to the magic that is not real, while the magic that is real, that can actually be done, is not real magic.

"I love that quotation," says Dennett, "and I now use it regularly, because for a lot of people, that's the way they feel about consciousness. Con-

sciousness has got to be real magic, or it's not real consciousness. They want it to be real magic, they want it to be supernatural."

For such people, consciousness can never be explained, because anything that shows "how it is done" is not "real consciousness", so there is no conceivable way in which real consciousness could be explained.

It's a compelling argument. But what explains the desire to keep consciousness a kind of magic in the first place?

"They think that this consciousness is what makes them special, and that's right. But they want to be, I don't know, more special than thou. They want their consciousness to be inexplicable because they think that preserves a certain hegemony or power-balance that they feel is threatened. If science overwhelms their consciousness, then they have no place to retreat from science, and a lot of people are anxious about that."

Fear of science is not something you could

They want consciousness to be real magic, they want it to be supernatural

accuse Dennett of. At a time when many are trying to distance themselves from traditional materialism, Dennett is proud to call himself a naturalist and a materialist.

"I think that one of the most to me gratifying effects of *Consciousness Explained* is that a

lot of people who thought they were good materialists, when they saw that basically I was right that materialism is a very counterintuitive view in some ways, the more they think about it they decide, 'well, gosh, maybe I'm a dualist after all'. This sort of forces them out of the closet and gets them to think more seriously about just how intuition-busting materialism is."

Dennett is keen to flush the dualists out, partly because he thinks dualism is so intellectually unrespectable, that a lot of the flaws in his opponents' positions would be much more evident if their dualist credentials were made explicit. Indeed, such is his antipathy to dualism – the view that mind and matter are fundamentally distinct – that he found it hard to figure out just why there are any left at all. He found his answer close to home.

"As my wife said when I was despairing and venting my frustration at this new wave of dualists in philosophy, 'Where else are people of dualist inclination going to gravitate except to philosophy?' As long as people are born with dualist bones in their bodies, they're going to end up in philosophy departments. They can't get a respectable hearing in psychology or brain science, so they're going to end up as theologians or philosophers. I think there's a lot of self-selection."

Dennett's position on consciousness can be, as he said, counter-intuitive. In particular, it requires us to do away with the idea of qualia: that conscious experience is characterised by the fact that there is something it is like to have it. "I think for a long time we've lived with a kind of complacent idea that you can have your materialism and your qualia too," he says. "No you can't." Of course, many who have come to the same conclusion have chosen to jettison

the materialism, not the qualia. Dennett, however, is made of sterner materialist stuff.

His position on free will is not quite as controversial, being as it is in a long line of respectable compatibilist approaches. *Freedom Evolves* is a kind of part-sequel, part-update of his 1984 work *Elbow Room*. The subtitle of that volume – *The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* – contains the key to understanding his approach.

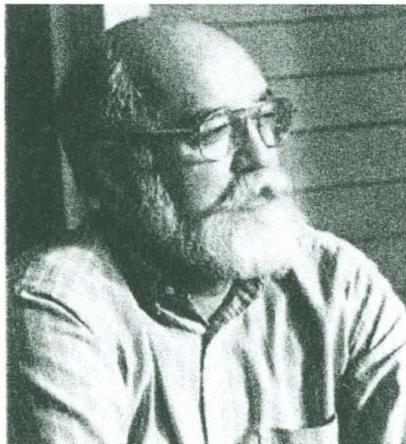
"It's child's play to define varieties of free will that we can't have, and then the question is why should we care? I think that the traditional incompatibilist free will is simply not worth wanting."

Dennett cites as an example of the kind of freedom he thinks worthless a variety Jerry Fodor claimed he desired in his review of *Freedom Evolves*: "One wants to be what tradition has it that Eve was when she bit the apple. Perfectly free to do otherwise. So perfectly free, in fact, that even God couldn't tell which way she'd jump."

"Well why would you want that kind of freedom?" asks Dennett. It's like wanting the kind of freedom that allows you to defy the laws of physics and influence events outside your light cone. All the kinds of freedom worth having, Dennett claims, are the kinds of freedom that have evolved as part of the natural world. At root, the freedom that really matters is the ability "to act for reasons that are our reasons", which is why Dennett believes the greatest threats to freedom are political, not metaphysical.

Dennett is unusual amongst leading philosophers in that his books are aimed at both general readers and his professional colleagues. Ironically, one of Dennett's few peers to do the same is John Searle, one of his sternest critics. Dennett writes in this way because he is unashamedly ambitious to contribute to the wider "great conversation" of humankind.

"I think it's a mistake of two sorts for philosophers to retreat into their academic shells



and have these in-grown discussions. It's a mistake first of all because it abandons the philosopher's best role as it's been through history, which is to contribute to that larger discussion, to be in fact leading influencers, clarifiers and setters of the big questions for everyone, for scientists, for laypeople, not just for philosophers. I think the abdication of that role is really sad.

"Moreover though I think there's a smaller, and intensely direct, important and practical point. When philosophers retreat into these little hermetically sealed groups of researchers, I would say they invariably end up engaged in artefactual busy-work of no real importance. If you can't explain why your questions are interesting questions to people who are outside the field then probably you're simply taking each other on a wild goose chase."

Dennett is not saying that the only philosophy worth doing is the kind that has the potential to be a bestseller. "There's plenty of really quite technical work to do that is an important part of philosophy, and I think it would be foolish to encourage people not to follow their, not so much personalities, but abilities." Nevertheless, he does think it a great shame that philosophers have become reluctant to tackle the big meaning of life issues, in

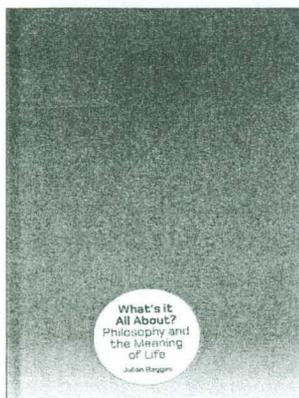
the public domain or within academe.

"I think many philosophers are a little bit embarrassed to be philosophers, and they're particularly embarrassed when they have to confront caricatures of philosophers, the sage who holds forth on the meaning of life. So they shuffle off into some fairly technical domain where they don't have to talk about the meaning of life and can talk instead about the latest models of whatever."

But embarrassment is not something Dennett seems to fear. He is willing to be the one to stand up to the greatest of his peers and tell them they're just wrong to see free will and consciousness as intractable. He is willing to stand up in public and talk about both technically weighty philosophical issues and those which relate more to people's existential concerns. In a philosophical world where ambition seems to have diminished over the years, it's a refreshing change, whether or not you ultimately believe he's succeeded in making the intractable tractable. **TM**

Suggested reading by Daniel C Dennett

- Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown)
- Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon & Schuster)
- Brainchildren* (MIT Press)
- Freedom Evolves* (Viking Penguin)



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